

LEGACIES OF SLAVERY TASK GROUP CONSULTATION OVERVIEW DOCUMENT

David Reynolds & Karen Campbell

We live in a multicultural, multiracial Britain. People hail Black footballers and athletes when they do something great for 'our' country. But those same people are often subject to racist abuse on sportsgrounds, through social media, on the streets and in shops. Black people who aren't celebrities suffer even worse – discriminated against in jobs, pay, housing, and educational opportunities because of prejudice against the colour of their skin, the way they dress or how they speak, even though most are UK citizens who have lived and worked in this country all their lives. The hurt has always been there, but it has been aggravated in the past two years by the murder of George Floyd and the inequalities highlighted by the particular vulnerability to Covid of people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. We have seen the upsurge in the Black Lives Matter movement among both Black people and white people in response to these global dynamics.

Racism has deep roots in our society. Slavery, one might say, was the original sin: the forcible removal of some 3¼ million Africans in British ships across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and the southern parts of what became the United States. These enslaved people and their descendants were treated as essential labour in the cultivation of crops such as sugar, tobacco and cotton – which played a major role in Britain's commercial and industrial revolutions. The slave trade was abolished by Parliament in 1807, followed in 1833 by the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire. Slave-owners were granted £20 million as compensation for their loss of 'property' – equivalent to perhaps £340 billion as a proportion of government spending today – but none of the 800,000 ex-slaves was compensated for the suppression of their freedom and that of their ancestors.

Although the UK Government has ruled out any programme of reparations, such projects have been initiated or promised by the institutional descendants of several prime movers in the British slave trade. These include Lloyds of London (who insured most of the voyages), many of the major banks (which provided credit to slave-traders) and the Universities of Glasgow, Liverpool and Bristol (cities that grew rich from the slave trade).

But the legacies of slavery endure most of all in racist attitudes of mind. In Roman and Saxon times many people in Britain were slaves – the Domesday Book of 1086 classified more than 10% of the population as slaves – but the practice seems to have died out by 1200. The transatlantic slave trade revived the institution of slavery but applied it almost entirely to Africans, marked out by the colour of their skin. This equation of slavery with race solidified a sense of superior status among whites – 'Britons never will be slaves', proclaimed Thomas Arne's *Rule, Britannia* (1740) – and this assumption of racial hierarchy became the norm elsewhere in the British Empire – even where slavery had not been

practised, such as the Indian sub-continent. The idea of racial hierarchy is the status quo which continues to shape every aspect of our world and our relationships today.

Saddest of all for us, racist assumptions also conditioned the Christianity of our forebears in the United Reformed Church. The URC, of course, was founded only in 1972, and none of its predecessor bodies took shape until the end of the slavery era. It's also true that many Dissenters played leading roles in the agitation to abolish slavery. But some profited from the ownership of slave ships (William Coward, a London merchant and patron of religious dissenters) or of slave plantations (William Alers Hankey, treasurer of the London Missionary Society for twenty years). The LMS focused on the saving of souls, rather than the lives of the slaves – not least because missionaries were not tolerated in the Caribbean colonies if suspected of being troublemakers.

This painful story is still being uncovered. Although many details remain hazy, it's clear that the URC (like other British institutions) is heir to a racist past that cannot fill us with pride. Most members of the URC have not thought much about the legacies of slavery – which have been whitewashed out of the familiar narrative of British history – but we are all implicated in the culture of racism that they fostered. George Floyd's murder and the disproportionate impact of Covid on Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities have made us more aware of the need to act. Although we are not responsible for the sins of our forebears centuries ago, we definitely are responsible for allowing them to poison our society in the 21st century.

That's why the Task Group calls on General Assembly to make a statement of apology and confession and to embark on a programme of 'repairing justice' – to include financial commitment, community projects and education - both in the UK and in parts of the Atlantic world still scarred by the legacies of slavery. These acts should be regarded as the start of a journey – part of our commitment to becoming an actively anti-racist church in God's name.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/18/lloyds-of-london-and-greene-king-to-make-slave-trade-reparations>

<https://www.lloyds.com/news-and-insights/news/our-full-statement-on-the-lloyds-markets-role-in-the-slave-trade>

Some Questions:

1. How do you respond to what you have read in this paper?
2. How happy would you feel to endorse the draft apology (see next page)?

Please be in contact with the task group to give us your feedback, or invite us to give local church presentations/lead conversations: global.intercultural@urc.org.uk

Apology and Confession by the United Reformed Church

(Draft)

We, the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, are mindful of our own current history, that of our antecedent bodies, the scriptural and theological groundings of our Basis of Union, and of our many declarations and resolutions over the years related to justice and the embracing of the humanity of all our sisters and brothers.

As a Conciliar Church, we have listened to one another as we received the report of Mission Committee on the ongoing Legacies of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. We have heard the pain of sisters and brothers who have been hurt and are still being hurt today by its legacies and by the continuing scourge of racism. We have heard God in Christ speaking to us in what we believe to be a Kairos moment. We acknowledge our weakness, the ambiguities we embody, and yet, in a spirit of humility and vulnerability, we are urged on by a movement of God's Spirit, calling us to a journey of words and actions born out of what we have felt and heard, a commitment to a future built on equity, justice and love.

To this end, the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, gathered here in Swanwick in the year 2022

- *humbly acknowledge our share in and benefit from our nation's participation, and that of our own antecedent bodies, in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.*
- *acknowledge that we speak as those who have shared in and suffered from the legacies of slavery and its appalling consequences for God's world.*
- *offer our apology to God and to our sisters and brothers in Africa, the Caribbean, and their descendants, for all that has created and still perpetuates such deep hurt, which originated from the horror of slavery.*
- *repent of the hurt we have caused, the divisions we have created, our reluctance to face up to the sin of the past, our unwillingness to listen to the pain of our African and Caribbean sisters and brothers, and our silence in the face of racism and injustice today.*
- *admit that these sins are part of our continuing failure to see and hear God in all our neighbours, whoever they may be.*
- *commit ourselves, in a true spirit of repentance*
 - *to take what we have heard and learnt at this Assembly and share it widely across the whole of the URC and beyond,*
 - *to find constructive ways by which we can turn this apology and confession into concrete actions of 'repairing justice' and so contribute to the prophetic work of God's coming kingdom.*
 - *to continue working to promote racial justice as part of our Christian commitment to justice for all*

As we ask for forgiveness, we invite all of the United Reformed Church to recommit ourselves to walking together in the Spirit of Christ so that all peoples may be blessed, and God's creation healed.

7 September 2021