

Paper 16

Legacies of (transatlantic) Slavery

Mission Committee

Basic information

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Action required	Discussion and decision.
Draft resolution(s)	20. General Assembly adopts the statement of ‘Confession and Apology by the United Reformed Church’ prepared by the Legacies of Slavery Task Group, and commits the Church to sharing the confession and apology widely, both within and beyond the URC, including with our global partners in Africa and the Caribbean. 21. General Assembly affirms its commitment to practical actions to address the continuing negative impacts of the legacies of transatlantic slavery on black communities in the UK, the Caribbean and Africa, and instructs the Legacies of Slavery Task Group to bring concrete and costed proposals to General Assembly 2023 for a considered programme of repairing justice.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	Update on the work of the Legacies of Slavery Task Group. Adoption of resolutions arising from this work.
Main points	General Assembly is asked to adopt a proposed ‘Confession and Apology’ in response to the legacies of transatlantic slavery; to commit the URC to implementing a programme of ‘repairing justice’; and to instruct the Task Group to bring firm proposals for repairing justice to General Assembly 2023.
Previous relevant documents	Healing: Hope in Action – Mission Committee Paper, September 2019 LoS Consultation Documents 2021/2022 Various past resolutions, including: ‘A Statement of regret and commitment’ – General Assembly 2007

	From 'Not Racist' to Anti-Racist – Mission Council November 2020
Consultation has taken place with...	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Synods and local congregations across the URC 2. URC Youth 3. Cascades of Grace 4. Racial Justice Advocates 5. Council for World Mission (CWM) and our partner churches in the UK, Europe and globally under the CWM umbrella 6. Umbrella Ecumenical Bodies including Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Churches Together in England, the Racial Justice Advocacy Forum 7. Individual ecumenical partners including the Methodist Church and the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

Summary of impact

Financial	No immediate financial implications.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	As noted in the following paper, there is keen interest from various ecumenical partners, including joint working across several churches and Christian entities, with the Methodist Church and Baptist Union particularly seeking to draw on the URC journey.

Legacies of Slavery Task Group

1. What we have done – and what we have learned

- 1.1 Throughout its 50 year history, the URC’s General Assembly has been passing resolutions deploring racism. For instance, in 2007 – the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade – General Assembly adopted a ‘statement of regret and commitment’ which recognised ‘the inhuman treatment of Africans transported across the Atlantic as slaves and forced to work in degrading conditions.’ It went on to say, ‘We are sorry for the legacy of that oppression which still distorts our relations with one another.’

- 1.2 In 2017, the Council for World Mission (CWM) held a series of Hearings which identified racism and deprivation as key legacies of transatlantic slavery impacting African and African descent communities around the globe – a judgment echoed by the 15 member states of CARICOM (Caribbean Community), and recently highlighted during royal visits to the region. Responding to those Hearings, the URC established its own Legacies of Slavery (LoS) Task Group under the remit of the Mission Committee, which produced a lengthy paper entitled ‘Healing: Hope in Action’, considered by Mission Council in autumn 2019. This set out the case for moving beyond ‘regret’ to a direct ‘apology’ for our country’s enslavement of Black peoples and for the way our society – and we, as part of that society – continue to benefit from the prosperity that accrued, and to be poisoned by the racist attitudes that enslavement helped to promote. The 2019 paper also argued that apology alone is an empty gesture unless accompanied by some practical

action in the form of reparations or reparative justice for black communities who continue to experience racism and deprivation in Africa, the Caribbean, and the UK.

- 1.3 Mission Council received ‘Healing: Hope in Action’ warmly, but asked the task group to do further work, including wider consultation, bringing proposals to General Assembly 2021. This was rendered impossible by the pandemic. It seemed fitting, then, to consider the issues at General Assembly 2022, given our biblical understanding of jubilee. Meanwhile, the disproportionate damage caused by Covid-19 to black and ethnic minority British communities, as well as the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement stimulated by the murder of George Floyd, have highlighted the continuing scourge of systemic racism and the need to make the URC actively anti-racist.
- 1.4 Our ecumenical partners are wrestling with these issues, too. Concerns and strategies are shared between member churches of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), Churches Together in England (CTE) and the Racial Justice Advocacy Forum (RJAF).¹ An apology was offered by the Baptist Union in 2007, who are now exploring the issue of reparations in conversation with the URC. The Methodist Church in Britain is also moving firmly in this direction, drawing on materials produced by the URC and showing great interest in our journey to date. Mutual learning continues between churches under the CWM umbrella, including within the UK and Europe, and in conversation with our Caribbean partners in particular.
- 1.5 In preparation for General Assembly 2022, the LoS Task Group consulted with Synods and local churches on the proposals for a URC Apology and reparations, including an invitation to engage with the related issues through ‘Black History Monthly’ online sessions throughout 2021, and the offer of local conversations facilitated by members of the Task Group, Cascades of Grace, or Racial Justice Advocates. Responses have been both verbal and written. Verbal responses have been overwhelmingly supportive. Of approximately 75 written submissions received by 16 May 2022, there is more than two-thirds support for the proposals; there is also deep scepticism in some quarters about their relevance today. Comments such as ‘slavery was a long time ago; it wasn’t my fault; proposals are just wokery’, have been received. It should be noted that several of the negative responses were phrased in a way that caused real hurt to black members of the

¹ The RJAF is an ecumenical Christian entity comprised of representatives from various Christian institutions such as the Ascension Trust, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, the Evangelical Alliance, the Methodist Church, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Salvation Army, the Sam Sharpe Project, and the United Reformed Church.

group who were tasked with reading them. They shocked all of us by their tone and content.

1.6 The Task Group does not wish to shy away from any of the responses received – all of which will be anonymised and made public before General Assembly meets in July 2022. We further intend to address the issues raised by adding to an FAQ document written in light of the autumn Synod presentations and previously circulated as part of the consultation materials. These documents will be available via the Legacies of Slavery webpage – www.urc.org.uk/legacies-of-slavery.

1.7 The LoS Task Group has been convinced by the positive responses and by events of recent years that it is time for our Church to move beyond vague statements of ‘regret.’ We have listened to the concerns expressed by some respondents, and amended the proposed apology in light of this. We also take seriously the voices of those who feel this work is not just timely, but well overdue. We therefore ask General Assembly to endorse the ‘Confession and Apology’ as now drafted, together with the interlinked paper on how to express those words in reparative actions. We are aware that some concerns will remain. We also note that some congregations did not feel able to respond within the timeframe. We therefore encourage continued engagement with the issues beyond the period of the formal consultation. We propose that congregations and synods be encouraged to discuss and contribute to ideas for reparative justice projects within the UK, and/or supporting the work of our partner churches in Africa and the Caribbean. This will help to deepen awareness of the pain that endures and the need to build an anti-racist Church as a legacy of the URC’s Year of Jubilee.

2. Proposed Confession and Apology by the United Reformed Church

2.1 We, the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, mindful of our own history and that of our antecedent bodies, wish to confess and apologise for our role in transatlantic slavery, and the scars which continue to blight our society, our Church, and the lives of black people in our midst and around the globe today. This action is firmly rooted in the gospel call to repentance, and gives life to the commitment in our Basis of Union to be ‘formed in obedience to the call to repent of what has been amiss in the past and to be reconciled.’

2.2 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, by these legacies, including the continuing scourge of racism. We have heard God in Christ speaking to us at what we believe to be a Kairos moment. In a spirit of humility and vulnerability, we are urged on by a movement of God’s Spirit, calling us for a journey of words and actions towards a future built on equity, justice and love.

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

- humbly acknowledges our share in and benefit from our nation's participation, and that of some of our own antecedent bodies, in transatlantic slavery.
- recognises our failure to honour the efforts of our abolitionist forebears by permitting the legacies of transatlantic slavery to continue shaping our world
- offers 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.
- repents of the hurt we have caused, our reluctance to face up to the sins of the past and our silence in the face of racism and injustice today.
- admits that these sins are part of our continuing failure to see and hear God in all our neighbours, whoever they may be.
- commits, in a true spirit of repentance:
 - to find constructive ways by which we can move from saying 'I'm sorry' 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
 - to encourage the whole United Reformed Church to be engaged in this journey.

3. The URC's commitment to 'repairing justice'

3.1 The Legacies of Slavery (LoS) Task Group has been consistently clear that 'Confession and Apology' without some form of practical action is an empty gesture, amounting to 'cheap grace'. Our expressions of apology must be accompanied by acts of 'repairing justice' – efforts which attempt some degree of 'putting right' without implying a direct payback, which would be impossible. Repairing justice is needed to show the world – and ourselves – that we are serious about the apology offered and wish to make amends for the injustices of the past which continue to shape the present. It will necessarily require some financial commitment, but is about much more than money.

3.2 The LoS Task Group paper 'Healing: Hope in Action' suggested three possible approaches to repairing justice with a range of possible actions, including:

3.21 For the URC

- **Relationships with CWM Churches.** Strengthening our relationships with our CWM partner churches in the Caribbean, and with the UK Districts of the European Presbyteries of our two Ghanaian partner churches, encouraging us to develop further as a multicultural Church.
- **Education.** An education programme to help us understand the legacies of transatlantic slavery, particularly as they impact our life together today. Such a programme could include topics such as white privilege, racism,

being a multicultural church with an intercultural habit, black self-image, white fragility and guilt, repentance and forgiveness.

3.22 For the UK

There are several objectives that could be sought by adding our voice to campaigns encouraging the UK government to:

- release LoS countries and communities from debt owed to the UK
- increase aid for LoS countries and communities
- support positive black self-image programmes.

3.23 For LoS countries and communities

Work with our partner churches in Africa and the Caribbean, supporting projects shaped by them to address issues identified by them, for example:

- improved literacy and healthcare
- reduction in deprivation
- positive self-understanding.

3.3 As part of the LoS consultation, the Task Group encouraged Synods and churches to suggest proposals to address specific issues in their local areas. Ideas shared include:

- truthful (local) history telling
- arts projects
- a campaign to remove monuments commemorating slave owners or slave traders from public areas – or to have such monuments truthfully labelled
- initiatives to support black youths in danger of offending/reoffending.

The Task Group welcomes all the suggestions received.

3.4 We ask the General Assembly in our Year of Jubilee to endorse this work by committing the Church to a considered programme of ‘repairing justice’ as part of our continuing journey towards becoming an actively anti-racist Church.

3.5 We further ask that this work be commended to synods and congregations for further discussion during 2022-2023. The Task Group will consider all comments and suggestions, including financial implications, bringing concrete proposals to General Assembly in 2023.