

Paper 14

Legacies of Slavery – acts of repairing justice: progress report

Mission Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Sarah Lane Cawte, Convenor of Mission Committee slanecawte@gmail.com Karen Campbell, Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries karen.campbell@urc.org.uk
Action required	None.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	Legacies of (transatlantic) Slavery – progress report from the task group regarding the URC commitment to acts of Repairing Justice.
Main points	Progress regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• anti-racism training• Proposal for developing/supporting regional mentoring projects for young black men• Proposals for collaboration with global partners. Report on the Ecumenical Pilgrimage to Jamaica, April 2024.
Previous relevant documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paper I3: Legacies of Slavery – proposals for repairing justice (General Assembly 2023)• Paper E1, Affirmative action towards an anti-racist Church (General Assembly 2022)• Healing: Hope in Action – Mission Committee Paper, September 2019. Related past resolutions, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• URC statement of Confession and Apology regarding the legacies of transatlantic slavery (2022)• General Assembly commitment to concrete acts of repairing justice in response to the continuing legacies of transatlantic slavery (2022)• From 'not racist' to anti-racist – Mission Council November 2020.
Consultation has taken place with...	The URC Treasurer The Chief Finance Officer Members of CRAF (Jamaica)

	<p>The Revd Les Isaac (OBE) Dr Lisa Adjei Ecumenical partners including CWM, the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church, Christian Aid, the Methodist Church, the Racial Justice Advocacy Forum.</p>
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Summary of impact

Financial	The URC Treasurer will bring a separate paper addressing a funding proposal for the repairing justice work.
External (eg ecumenical)	Most of our ecumenical partners are engaging in work concerning the legacies of transatlantic slavery. Different churches/entities are taking different approaches and are at varying stages of the journey – very few have reached the point of offering an apology. Several are looking to the URC for inspiration and/or guidance. Our partners in Jamaica are also looking to us to continue the journey we have started with them and to be an advocate for the reparations work they have researched, and which now needs resourcing to bring to fruition.

Legacies of Slavery: Repairing justice – an update for General Assembly 2024

Introduction

The URC is definitely on a journey – and it is a joy to be part of the journey; to see how quickly it is taking shape. Despite the current speed of movement, the process has been well considered, and is being thought through at each stage. The overarching journey has not been quick. The current path has been shaped, and the foundations laid, by decades of dedicated racial justice work in the URC, carried out by activists and allies who have refused to be silent or to be silenced. But it feels like something is shifting – or something has shifted – and we are in a particular moment, right here, right now.

Recent background

Many people thought we would never see the day when the URC would publicly acknowledge a role in, and benefit from, transatlantic slavery – but in July 2022, URC General Assembly did indeed adopt a statement of Confession and Apology concerning the role of our antecedent bodies in transatlantic slavery and the continuing legacies which blight both Church and world. At the same time, General Assembly made a commitment to acts of ‘repairing justice’ – concrete actions seeking in some way to ‘put right’ that which has been damaged and distorted by the trafficking of African bodies, and the legacies of racism, injustice and inequality which continue today.

General Assembly 2023 adopted a further resolution proposing a three-strand approach to repairing justice:

- Local – within the body of the URC
- Regional – within the UK
- Global – working with partners in the Caribbean and Africa, possibly with and through the Council for World Mission (CWM).

Since then, the URC Legacies of Slavery (LoS) Task Group has subdivided itself to follow up and develop the proposals.

Repairing justice: progress to date

a. Local: Anti-racism training

This focus builds on work carried out in the wake of George Floyd's murder which prompted the denomination to pose the question, 'Do Black Lives Matter in the URC?' and led to the November 2020 commitment to journey from 'not racist' to becoming an 'actively anti-racist' Church – after all, how can the Church speak with integrity unless we are committed to setting right within our own body that which we challenge and critique in the world around? Further work was carried out by the Positive Action Task Group and Senior Leadership Group which, in conversation with the LoS task group, proposed that our local action should take the form of widespread anti-racism training within the denomination.

General Assembly 2023 adopted a resolution making anti-racism training mandatory for certain groups and individuals holding positions of leadership, decision-making and influence in our Church. The training was developed by Professor Anthony Reddie, and delivery began in January 2024.

While some concern was expressed in advance of the training, particularly questioning whether the approach used would make white people feel guilty for being white, the sessions have been overwhelmingly well received. Feedback repeatedly indicates that participants find the sessions deeply challenging, yet thoroughly enjoyable. A sentiment expressed by one person, and reflected by many, is as follows: 'I thought I'd come away feeling guilty; instead, I felt empowered to recognise and use my privilege for the good.'

Of course, the training has not been to everyone's liking. The sessions could be described as an exploration of anti-oppressive practice rather than 'training' in anti-racism, and no attempt is made to 'supply the right answers'. These points can, however, be viewed as strengths rather than criticisms. Professor Reddie encourages participants to see that the issues are multi-layered, so there are no one-size-fits-all easy solutions. He facilitates a specifically theological journey in which people are enabled to recognise that the status quo is not neutral, and to consider the part we each can play in shaping the way things are and in bringing about change.

At the time of writing, seven sessions have been delivered involving more than 115 participants from various networks, including, but not limited to, the Mission Committee, General Secretariat, Officers of Assembly, Synod Moderators, and individuals engaged in the breadth of the URC's Disciplinary Process. Further sessions will be delivered by Professor Reddie as we work through the initial groups for whom the training is mandatory. Members of the LoS sub-group are giving serious consideration to how the training can be cascaded more widely across the denomination.

b. Regional: mentoring of young black men

The LoS task group decided from an early stage to focus its regional proposals on the mentoring of young black men. This was in no small way influenced by two Children's and Youth Development Officers (CYDOs) allocated time to work with the group. Why young black men? Because while inequalities and injustices are experienced by African diaspora communities in the UK in general, young black men particularly bear the brunt of multiple inequalities.

The vision for the regional proposal is to support mentoring projects in four locations across the UK which have clear historical links with transatlantic slavery – one each in Scotland, the North of England, the South of England, and Wales. Each project will be linked with a local URC – possibly offering its building for use, as appropriate, but definitely holding the work in ongoing prayer. A further dimension would see the creation of one pioneering post in each location, hosted by the local URC, with the postholders embodying and further developing the link between the local church and the mentoring project. The aim is for the four postholders to collaborate with each other to form a network of learning and expertise across the URC.

It is immediately apparent that the regional proposal is incredibly ambitious – and it was always going to be the most challenging to bring to fruition. The sub-group has been grappling with questions which include:

- What do we mean by ‘mentoring’? Mentoring towards what?
- Which projects / individuals might we work with?
- Who are other potential partners who might help resource the vision?

While many questions remain on the table, there have been some exciting developments. The subgroup has been challenged by the Revd Les Isaac OBE, founder of Street Pastors, to buck the trend by choosing to work with projects which are not yet well established, but may involve grassroots individuals who themselves have fallen foul of various systems and are now seeking to share their lived wisdom with others who are coming behind. The Revd Isaac has offered to work with the subgroup in the role of consultant, to make introductions and help get the relationships established and properly supported. There is the potential here for true partnership-working; the possibility for making a real difference to the lives of the potential mentors seeking to turn things around, and the lives of potential mentees who will have the opportunity to access the projects.

c. Global: collaborating with partners in the Caribbean and Africa

The global strand emerges from a place of humility. The aim is to collaborate with our global partners to support work they have identified for themselves, rather than us presuming to know what is needed in their contexts.

In truth, we have not yet progressed work with partners in Africa; this is simply because of time and resource constraints, and has not been forgotten. In contrast, developments have been rapid and exciting with specific reference to Jamaica. As reported at General Assembly 2023, the Churches’ Reparations Action Forum (CRAF) – currently focused on Jamaica, but with conversations spanning into the wider Caribbean – became aware of the URC’s statement of Confession and Apology; the Revd Dr Gordon Cowans reached out on behalf of CRAF to accept our apology and extend an offer to partner with us in our commitment to repairing justice.

CRAF has done considerable work researching and articulating a 7-Point Plan for Reparations (see appendix 1). The Plan starts with Apology and goes on to outline various interlinked areas which need to be addressed to bring about healing of societal wounds caused by chattel slavery and its enduring impacts.

During a UK visit in June 2023, CRAF invited representatives from a number of UK Churches to visit Jamaica to further their respective journeys concerning transatlantic slavery and its continuing legacies; the seed was sown for an Ecumenical Pilgrimage to Jamaica which took place in April 2024. Three members of the URC, including the Revd

Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson, Moderator of the General Assembly, took part in the Pilgrimage alongside colleagues from the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church, and Christian Aid. They were later joined by a further URC participant as part of his sabbatical.

Members of the LoS global sub-group had already engaged with the CRAF 7-Point Plan prior to the Pilgrimage, and had particularly warmed to the proposal for the development of 'New Free Villages' (point 5), addressing the landlessness of a large proportion of Jamaica's population, and the lack of means to create wealth. This proposal would see the Church in Jamaica contributing land gained as a legacy of slavery and colonisation, while partners such as the URC would help to resource the development of housing and infrastructure (see appendix 2: New Free Village Movement). In this way, the Church in the respective contexts would embark on a journey together – each addressing the legacies as pertains to them; each contributing to the process of 'putting right'. The Pilgrimage provided opportunity to visit the site of one prospective development located in Jackson Town, where up to 40 households (120 direct beneficiaries) might potentially be housed.

Black identity, image and self-worth

The CRAF 7-Point Plan also highlights the issue of psychological trauma affecting black identity and self-worth (point 2). The 2019 LoS task group report *Healing: Hope in Action* picked up the same theme, recommending programmes to support positive Black self-image and self-worth as part of reparations proposals for the URC, the UK, and in relevant global partner contexts. In light of this, a second dimension to the global proposal has emerged – the development of a three-way pilgrimage (Africa, Caribbean, and UK) gathering African and African diaspora people to explore issues of identity, belonging, broken histories and hidden histories, with the aim of reclaiming their God-given self-worth. The aim is for a rolling programme in which different cohorts of participants build ongoing relationships by meeting and exploring together in all three contexts. The programme will include a particular focus on young people, recognising that for real change to be effected, there must be a cross-generational approach.

God really is good. Dr Lisa Adjei, the Christian Aid presence in the Jamaica Pilgrimage, is also founder of the Sankofa Collective, a Christian charity engaged in work along the lines being proposed. As the charity's website explains, 'The name Sankofa [from the Akan tribe in Ghana] means we should reach back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us, so that we can achieve our full potential as we move forward. Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone, or been stripped of, can be reclaimed, revived, preserved, and perpetuated.' (sankofacollective.org). It has been suggested that the URC and CRAF, in conversation with Dr Adjei, could pilot an initial programme, even while we explore and bring on board Africa-based partners in the near future.

The URC apology – did it matter?

This paper cannot be concluded without further reference to the URC's statement of Confession and Apology. For those who argued that a URC apology was meaningless and could make no difference, developments since General Assembly 2022 have shown that they were undoubtedly wrong. CRAF names Apology as the first step in the process of reparation and healing. It was our apology that drew these partners to us. It mattered to them.

A special service was held during the Jamaica Pilgrimage, in which the Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson, Moderator of the General Assembly of the URC, read aloud the

Confession and Apology. She hand-delivered a copy of the document, which was received by the Revd Gary Harriott, her counterpart in the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands (UCJCI) as he subsequently pledged church-owned land to further the reparations proposals. The URC Apology mattered to the people gathered to witness this historic event.

In the ensuing days – as we were invited to contribute to interviews on Jamaican television and radio, as we listened to people share their reflections, and as we heard the testimony of one man who was moved to tears at witnessing the Church own up to its guilt and expressing a commitment to putting right – there was no doubt that our Apology absolutely mattered.

Relationships and reparations

A clear and frequently repeated learning point from Jamaica, and from CRAF specifically, is that reparation is first and foremost about the healing of relationships – the bringing together of those who have been divided by a hideous history and its continuing impacts. It is only then, in relationship, that financial reparations find their true meaning. If I love my neighbour as I love myself, or as I would wish to be loved, it follows that I will do what I can to enable their wellbeing – even more so if I am aware of my complicity in their struggles. It is with this conviction that the task group has been in conversation with the URC Treasurer and Chief Finance Officer to seek meaningful ways of resourcing the reparations (repairing justice) proposals outlined in this paper. Reparations do not start with money – but it does require money to resource the practical actions needed to bring about change.

Resourcing the repairing justice proposals

Local: Anti-racism training – has been funded from the Mission Committee budget and will continue to be funded in this way. We give God thanks.

Regional: Mentoring Projects – conversations are underway. In the Revd Les Isaac, we have the interest and potential commitment of a grassroots expert-consultant. We will require funding – for the mentors, for the creation of the pioneering posts, for ongoing costs. Even while potential partners are being sought, what might the URC feel inspired to offer? How ambitious dare we be in our dreaming?

Global: New Free Villages – the UCJCI has pledged land, and other church denominations in Jamaica are being urged to do the same. To what extent can the URC partner this initiative by offering practical financial support? Equally important, are we ready to offer prayer support? And how can we inspire other UK entities to catch the CRAF vision, becoming partners in the work too?

Global: Three-Way Pilgrimage – CRAF is ready to work with us to pilot a programme as soon as practicable. We have connections with the Sankofa Collective, an existing charitable organisation with expertise in delivering projects along the same lines. We are exploring other potential sources of funding – but what can the URC commit?

Members of the URC Finance Committee have caught the vision of the repairing justice proposals and have been working on a financial plan to enable the URC's LoS journey to continue – to move the task group's work from vision to reality. We pray that as one part of Christ's body, focused on the healing and wellness of all parts, the URC will achieve and surpass all that is being proposed.