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As part of the United Nations Permanent Forum on People of African Descent, an event was co-hosted by Kenya and the Anglican Communion, with high-level panel participation by Barbados, Jamaica and Ghana. The gathering on Monday 14 April focused on reparatory justice and institutional accountability, with the Church of England offering a case study.

Opening the event, Dr June Soomer, Chair of the Permanent Forum and member of the St Lucia Reparations Committee, underscored the urgent need for institutions to make commitments towards reparatory justice.

The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, followed with a keynote address, beginning with a Ghanaian proverb: “Until the lion has told his story, the hunter will always be the hero.” He acknowledged the Church’s historic complicity in the horrors of the slave trade and emphasised the moral and spiritual imperative of truth-telling, accountability, and healing.

“The Church is committed to creating a space for truth-telling, reflection, and accountability,” Archbishop Stephen said. “Inspired and motivated by the vision of a new humanity that God gives us in Jesus Christ, we acknowledge the moral responsibility we carry in the present for the failings of the past, particularly in light of the wealth handed down through generations. Our hope is that the work we are doing—to repair, to heal, and to pursue justice—demonstrates how Christian faith can bring about real change in the world. As we pursue an ongoing, living process of listening, learning and acting, we also hope it encourages others to reflect on their own histories and responsibilities.”

In 2019, the Church Commissioners, who manage the Church of England’s historic endowment, began a comprehensive investigation into the Church’s financial and institutional links to slavery. The findings were sobering: investments in the South Sea Company, profits derived from the slave trade, and disturbing artifacts like “slave Bibles”—scriptures deliberately stripped of themes of liberation.

In response, the Church has committed £100 million toward a long-term impact investment fund, a grant program, and a research initiative, governed by an independent oversight group. This effort, chaired by The Rt Revd Rosemarie Mallett, Bishop of Croydon, includes descendant communities, historians, and representatives of populations still affected by the legacy of slavery.

At the UN event, Bishop Rosemarie also contributed to the panel discussion, featuring David Comissiong, Barbados’ Ambassador to the Caribbean Community and Deputy Chairman of the National Task Force on Reparations, Ambassador Brian Wallace, Permanent Representative of Jamaica to the UN, Ambassador Harold Agyeman, Permanent Representative of Ghana, and Ambassador Yabesh Monari, Deputy Permanent Representative of Kenya.

“The dialogue at the UN represents a new phase of engagement and commitment from the Church of England,” said Bishop Rosemarie, “one rooted in the hope that—even after deep historical failure—reconciliation and justice are still possible.”

Public apologies have already been issued by both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church Commissioners, but Church leaders acknowledge that apology alone is not enough. The Church is now engaged in a long-term journey of what it describes as “penitence, partnership, and purpose.”

To close this time of reflection, attendees will gather in prayer at the Ark of the Return memorial on Wednesday, 15 April at 12-noon EST. The memorial has become a sacred site of remembrance and pilgrimage—honouring those lost to the African chattel enslavement and reaffirming the Church’s commitment to remembrance, repentance, and reconciliation.

The full text of the Archbishop of York address follows:

Your Excellencies, sisters and brothers, thank you for this opportunity to be here today to begin and continue this important conversation.

Standing above one of the cells in Cape Coast Castle in Ghana last November, the young man, a student, who was showing us round began his tour by quoting a Ghanaian proverb which goes like this: ‘Until the lion has told his story, the hunter will always be a hero.’

There are others here this week and today who can tell the lion’s story. I am here to share the story of how this hunter has been humbled. And it is doubly humbling that it was the church of Jesus Christ that was so invested in the horrific hunting down, enslavement and commodification of human beings that took place through transatlantic chattel enslavement.

First of all, I, we in the Church of England have been humbled by the truth.

The Church Commissioners who look after the historic endowment fund of the Church of England began research in 2019 into our links with this evil trade: how we invested in the South Sea Company, and the very significant amounts of money we made from this.

We discovered other horrifying things along the way. Unanswered letters. A so called slave Bible with all mentions of liberation and the whole Book of Exodus missing. We discovered details of the mundane and bureaucratic normalisation of evil, when it is enacted on such a scale, and for so many years. And how we, the hunters were deaf to the cries of the oppressed.

Jesus famously said that the truth will set you free. There is an irony here. The scriptures and traditions of the church that were twisted to legitimise enslavement, also, when they could be read in full, provided narratives of liberation and resistance which gave enslaved people hope.

But in a way, we the hunters, we the slave traders, we the twisters of Christian tradition, have also been set free by this truth. It gives us a narrative about what it is to be human, how we belong to one another, and how we inhabit this world together; the very values that are at the heart of the United Nations. Values which are at peril in our world today, values that we so urgently need to recover.

But because we failed in this. Because we exploited and bought and sold our own sisters and brothers, we too need to be liberated from our failings. We need to do this by being honest and penitent about what happened, and then determined to build a better world. We want to work purposefully and collaboratively with others, such as our friends and colleagues from Kenya and Barbados with whom we share the sponsorship of this event. And Jamaica, and Ghana. And sisters and brothers across the world.

And this has led to penitence. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church Commissioners themselves have made public apologies for our involvement with chattel enslavement. We have also considered what amendment of life might look like, what else we need to learn, what other partnerships we need to build, and what responses we need to make.

And in 2023, the Church Commissioners committed £100m to create an impact investment fund, grant scheme and research programme. As we navigate the legal complexities of setting up this fund, we are pressing ahead, and during 2024, we worked with a panel of experts (of which Bishop Rosemarie, who is here today, was the chair) to advise us on our approach, including where the fund should operate and how.

And this work goes on.

Last September 2024, Fr Tim Kesicki, a Jesuit priest here in New York, and descendant leader Monique Maddox, whom I'm delighted to say are here this afternoon, came and spoke to a meeting of every bishop in the Church of England about their experiences of working together in the pursuit of reparatory justice. Together we visited All Souls College Library in Oxford where there is a statue of Christopher Codrington, who bequeathed two plantations to USPG in Barbados.

At this meeting, Monique reminded us that although our honesty about the failings of the past, our penitence and our determination to build a better future are to be welcomed, it is not up to us to choose our penance. That is, we should not and must not imagine that we can control what happens with this work. This is why the oversight group is entirely independent from the Church Commissioners and the Church of England.

It is also, I suppose, why we are here. We don't have the answers, but we believe we are, at last, asking the right questions. And, because we live in a world where it is all too easy to choose the path of separation, to pull up the drawbridge on some, to stamp down others, of 'othering' and 'deplatforming', of building bigger walls and sentries, of siloes, of narrowing perspectives, of race hatred, the echo chambers of social media, and deciding whom we think is really human, who is in and who is out, what we want to do is to build partnerships and coalitions of good will. We want dialogue, we want to do better.

Tragically we know, and we see it in the world around us today the terrible consequences of letting the dangerous and brutally savage beliefs that led to enslavement, segregation and oppression go unchecked. They are a real and present danger today in our world.

We know that we have much to learn. We want to be all in, and we need help, and we know that this is a long journey. This work that we are engaged in is both deeply uncomfortable and deeply hopeful.

It is deeply uncomfortable, because I am here as a leader in the church that was involved in a most shameful, scandalous abuse and oppression of fellow human beings. It is deeply uncomfortable because slavery still exists in our world today and it is deeply uncomfortable because the legacy of transatlantic chattel enslavement still blights many people and many communities.

But sisters and brothers, it is also deeply hopeful, because the scriptures and the example of Christ and those narratives of liberation that inspired enslaved people, inspire me and give us hope for our world and hope that we can do better.

And we also know that there are many other institutions, organisations, governments and individuals who profited from this evil trade. We humbly invite them to ask the questions we are asking. To join us on this journey into that better vision of the world where we are one humanity.

It is in that spirit that I come to you today, believing that a better future is possible, believing that the truth can set us free. Believing that it is possible to find reconciliation even after deep, dark failure. And refusing to let evil triumph, because, to slightly alter the words of the prophet Isaiah, we have a vision for the world where the lion and the hunter might live in peace, where justice and mercy embrace each other.

Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York

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