

After the Flood: the Church, Slavery and Reconciliation

An introduction to the film
for Methodist churches
with prayers, conversation
and reflection



Black History Month 2024

After the Flood: the Church, Slavery and Reconciliation

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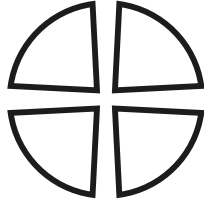
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Welcome Message from the President and the Vice-President of the Methodist Conference

The transatlantic slave trade was a crime against humanity.

Between the mid-seventeenth and early nineteenth century, Britain transported an estimated 3.1 million Africans to British colonies in the Caribbean, North and South America and other countries. Many of them died before arriving; those who survived the journey lived and died in conditions of extreme cruelty and exploitation.

The slave trade is not just an historical event. The injustices it caused have rippled on through the lives and societies of enslaved African people and their descendants. Slavery enabled Britain to generate unprecedented wealth from which our society still benefits today.

The slave trade was humankind at our most broken. It was made possible because slaves were denied their humanity – they were literally seen as non-human, traded and treated as property. And when slavery was finally ended, it was the slave-owners who were compensated financially, rather than those who had been enslaved.

Many of those who opposed slavery were inspired by their faith: Olaudah Equiano was a freed slave who converted to Methodism and became a passionate campaigner for the abolition of the slave trade. Robert Wedderburn was born in Jamaica in 1762 to an enslaved woman of colour and a Scottish-born slaver and plantation owner. He used his sermons as a Unitarian minister to advocate for working-class rights and the abolition of slavery. The Revd John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, developed his theology and thoughts on civil liberty and natural rights over time, until he published his *Thoughts on Slavery* in 1774 – 250 years ago this year – calling for slavery to be abolished. His last known letter was written from his deathbed, six days before he died, to encourage the young Christian abolitionist MP, William Wilberforce, in his campaigning. Yet, shamefully, many Christians gave theological justification for the slave trade and were prominent participants in it.

The Methodist Conference has asked our Church to consider how to respond to the lasting damage caused by the slave trade. Many institutions are currently examining the direct or indirect benefit to them from the slave trade, and we are doing the same.

As we take these steps together towards repentance, reconciliation, reparations and restoration, we need to begin by listening. We are inviting all Methodists – whatever our cultural backgrounds and ethnicity – to watch the film, *After the Flood*, which looks at the Christian roots of the transatlantic slave trade.

This is a challenging area; perhaps frightening for some, or provoking for others. For our Presidential theme, we have chosen the text from Isaiah, “*Learn to do what is right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed.*” At times, we may have been on the side of the oppressors; others of us may speak from an experience of oppression. But, as Christians, we have an uncompromising calling, to take a step of faith with God; towards what is right and just. It may feel risky, but we follow a God who led people out of slavery and into freedom.

**The Revd Helen Cameron,
President of the Methodist Conference**

**Mrs Carolyn Godfrey,
Vice-President of the Methodist Conference**

Note

Currently, in relation to this topic we are using the language of the Memorial (M22) to the 2021 Methodist Conference to refer to the focus of this work (ie ‘transatlantic slave trade’) and aiming to use ‘enslaved people/Africans’ consistently to describe those subjected to that practice. However, we recognise that in such contexts the terminology is never uncontroversial and opinions will vary on how enslaved people, their trafficking and their enslavers should be identified and we will be discussing further the developing and preferred terminology as we consult on our Church’s response.

Introduction to *After the Flood:* *the Church, Slavery and Reconciliation*

During Black History Month in October 2024, and on into 2024/2025, Methodist churches are being invited to show the film, *After the Flood* in churches, communities or house groups, and encourage conversations about the film. Then people are invited also to visit methodist.org.uk/AfterTheFlood to share what they think, or have discussed.

After the Flood was produced by the Movement for Justice and Reconciliation to examine the roots and legacies of the eighteenth-century Church's role in the transatlantic slave trade. This 67-minute feature documentary has been licensed to be made available to all Methodist churches.

After the Flood looks at the ideas that justified and sustained the enslavement of Black Africans, exploring biblical justifications around the origins of racism, whiteness and slavery. It examines how slavery came to be seen as Christian, and how Christians (and the Church of England in particular) participated in the transatlantic slave trade. Finally, it looks at the legacy of slavery in racism, and asks questions around reconciliation.

While this topic is not an easy one, it is vital that we engage with it. This material should help to resource our conversations, our reflections and our commitment to action. In the words of James Baldwin, "not everything can be transformed, but nothing can be transformed unless it is faced", and of Cornel West, "justice is what love looks like in public". Our participation in the waking life of love invites us to engage with the truth about slavery, learn from it and commit to act justly.

The Revd Helen Cameron, President of the Methodist Conference

This film is provocative. This is going to get us repenting. This is going to get us praying.

The Rev Alton Bell, Chair of the Movement for Justice and Reconciliation

To download the film, please complete a form at methodist.org.uk/AfterTheFlood
Please note: the terms of the licensing agreement are that only Methodist or Methodist/LEP settings may show this film.

For all other settings, please purchase or rent a copy of the film from atfdocumentary.vhx.tv

A History and Context of Methodism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

As *After the Flood* gives particular insight into the Church of England's role in the transatlantic slave trade, it may be helpful for facilitators of group discussion to have an understanding of the Methodist Church's history and involvement. We would encourage facilitators to read and make note of this short history and context.

The Methodist Church is seeking to understand the lasting impact of the transatlantic slave trade on the Church, by listening to the opinions of our Partner Churches around the world as well as to Methodists in Britain – and you can be part of this process by watching this film and sharing your responses.

...I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villany, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? ...

The Revd John Wesley to William Wilberforce, 24 February 1791

John Wesley, the most prominent founder of Methodism, is well known for opposing the enslavement of African people, arguing that slavery was immoral – intrinsically, rather than because of the brutality that it inevitably involved. This led to Methodism being considered fundamentally 'abolitionist', but the reality was far more complex.

The years of the 1700s saw the rule of 'King Sugar' in the Caribbean. All life and activity in the islands revolved around the cultivation, production and distribution of this commodity. The sugarcane was grown on British-owned plantations, in many cases, with absentee landlords. Working on these plantations were men and women who had been captured in their native Africa and sold as enslaved people to the plantation owners to work in the cane fields.

The Methodist movement developed in a period of British history that was economically dependent on the 'Triangular Trade' in manufactured goods, sugar and other commodities, and enslaved people, in centres of that trade such as Bristol: Methodists were inevitably complicit in the transatlantic slave trade.

Unlike the Church of England, the only 'corporate' Church link we have identified so far between early Methodism and the slave trade or with owning plantations, is that in the late 1780s, the Connexion, represented by the Revd Dr Thomas Coke (then Methodism's leading missionary), owned a coffee and cotton plantation on the island of St Vincent, which was for a time worked by enslaved labour.

His misguided aim in buying enslaved people was to further the mission to the Caribs of St Vincent and he was censured severely for doing so, while the Missionary Committee in London was strongly opposed to slavery and forbade missionaries from owning enslaved people.

However, individual supporters made donations to John Wesley or local Methodist societies that were possible because of direct ownership of plantations worked by enslaved people or indirect involvement in the trade, for example as boat chandlers or sailors.

Our research is ongoing into the sources and scale of such financial support through income from the transatlantic slave trade that the Methodist Church in Britain may have received and from which the Church may be benefitting still.

The Wesleys and the slave trade

The Revd Samuel Wesley (father of John and Charles Wesley, founders of Methodism) was an early opponent of the slave trade. In an unsigned article in the *Athenian Oracle*, for which Samuel shared responsibility with his brother-in-law John Dunton, he declared that "I ... cannot see how such a trade (tho' much used by Christians) can be any way justified, and fairly reconciled to the Christian law."

John and Charles Wesley encountered slavery in South Carolina in 1736 when they journeyed to the settlements of North America, but then there is, apparently, silence from John Wesley on this subject for nearly 40 years. However, we know he admired men like Edward Colston, a Bristol merchant and philanthropist whose fortune derived in part from his active engagement in the trade in enslaved Africans, and had friendships with sugar plantation owners such as Barbadian Sir Philip Gibbes or brothers, Nathaniel and Francis Gilbert of Antigua.

It was not until John Wesley was inspired by a Quaker, Anthony Benezet, that he attacked what he called "this execrable villainy" in his *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774) and other writings. In March 1788, he preached on slavery to a large congregation in the New Room, Bristol, and a violent interruption in the middle of his sermon caused "inexpressible terror and confusion". This may have been due to people hired by plantation owners to disrupt the meeting. Some Methodists still don't take sugar in their tea today 'on account of Mr Wesley', after John Wesley encouraged a boycott as a way of showing disapproval of the transatlantic slave trade. In what may have been his last letter, John Wesley strongly urged William Wilberforce to continue his battle against slavery (see quote above).

Methodism in the Caribbean

Organised religion in the Caribbean was solely vested in the Church of England that came with the planters and the Church of Scotland that came with the buccaneers

and catered to the needs of those groups. The slaves were expected to take their masters to church and then retire to a safe distance from the church as they waited to take their masters home at the end of the church service. That Methodism came to be introduced in a context such as this, Methodists in Antigua assert “must have been through the providence of God”.

Outside the British Isles, Antigua was thus the first territory in the world to which Methodism was introduced – and it survived and thrived due to three enslaved women. In 1757, Nathaniel Gilbert had sailed to England taking with him three slaves from his estate, and under Wesley’s preaching he was converted to Methodism. The three enslaved women are referred to as Bessie, Sophia Campbell and Mary Alley. While the journeying of these women with their master to England was not unusual at the time, to have been allowed the privilege of hearing Wesley preach and to have been baptized by him went against the order of the day. This incident was so out of the ordinary that Wesley records it in his diary. In the 29 November 1758 entry, Wesley records:

I rode to Wandsworth and baptized two Negroes belonging to Mr Gilbert, a gentleman lately come from Antigua. One of them is so deeply convinced of sin: the other rejoices in God her Saviour and is the first African Christian I have known.

On Nathaniel Gilbert’s return to Antigua in 1759, he first shared his new found joy with his friends and later started to preach to his enslaved people the message of salvation that he had heard from John Wesley. After his death and the death of his brother, the care and spiritual nurture of the flock was left to the enslaved women who kept the work going.

That the society and economy of the Caribbean was based on West African slavery presented the Methodist missionaries in the West Indies with a dilemma. They were dependent on the goodwill of the plantation owners for their access to the enslaved people whose spiritual good was their primary concern. Therefore, when early missionaries in the West Indies (such as John Stephenson in Bermuda, John Barry in Jamaica, John Rutledge in the Bahamas or William H Rule in St Vincent) bore witness against the institution of slavery itself, they suffered through their opposition to slave owning.

Compromise, abolition and emancipation

Visiting the newly independent American States in 1784/1785, Thomas Coke found slavery to be too controversial an issue for open denunciation without damaging Methodism’s appeal to the American people. He deemed the newly formed Church to be “in too infantile a state to push things to extremity”. In the nineteenth-century, American slavery would be an issue that would split the Methodist Episcopal Church, as well as the nation as a whole.

The Missionary Committee in London was firm in its opposition and its rule of forbidding missionaries to own enslaved people, which created problems for someone like John Rutledge who inherited enslaved people by marriage. In 1807, the year the Slave Trade Act (or An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade) was passed, which prohibited the trade in enslaved people in the British Empire (but did not automatically emancipate those enslaved at the time), Methodist missionaries were explicitly forbidden to marry any slave-owner. Members of the Methodist societies were not subjected to the same discipline. The response of the Antigua District Synod was that "the publication of that minute [against marriage] was impolitic, the execution of it impracticable, & the effects of it injurious". The missionaries faced a difficult choice between open opposition to slavery and free access to the enslaved people themselves. The 1822 *Instructions to Missionaries* insisted that their task was "to promote the moral and religious improvement of the slaves", without "interfering with their civil condition". 'Equality before God' did not imply political or social equality.

Some plantation owners welcomed the missionaries and supported the building of chapels, and some of them treated their enslaved people humanely. However, others suspected the missionaries of fomenting trouble with enslaved people, especially as the movement for emancipation gathered strength. In 1824, some of the missionaries in Jamaica sought to defend themselves against charges by passing a series of resolutions in favour of slavery, the so-called 'Jamaica Resolutions'. This compromised the policy of the Missionary Committee in London. The Committee censured the missionaries and strongly reasserted its anti-slavery stand.

In the same year in Britain, Richard Watson preached a sermon that ably presented the case against slavery, though advocating a gradual and peaceful process towards its abolition. Then the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in 1830, at Watson's instigation, adopted a series of resolutions against slavery anywhere in the British Empire and exhorted local congregations to sign petitions against it.

The Slavery Abolition Act 1833 came into force on 1 August 1834, when all enslaved people in the British Empire were to be considered free under British law. Many think that it was from Britain also that the movement for emancipation sprang. However, in reality, the movement for emancipation emerged among the enslaved people themselves, through processes of everyday resistance and more-significant revolt. Philanthropic and legislative activity aimed at abolition (and subsequently emancipation) in Europe and eventually the Americas complemented their long struggle against the transatlantic traffic in enslaved Africans.

Praying Around the Film

For before viewing the film

God of all time,
You challenge each and every generation
to speak afresh about your timeless message of love and grace.

Be with us [today/this afternoon/tonight] as we watch and reflect
on a story that took your words and used them
to hurt, belittle,
enslave and break
men, women and children.

Sit with us, if we need to weep.
Walk with us, if we feel anger or rage.
Open our ears to the stories and experiences
this film prompts people to share. Amen.

Universal God, you created the people of the world in your own image.
We pray that you will open our eyes to see your creation as you see it.

Give us the insight and understanding to see where we have wronged
our brothers and sisters by overlooking who they are and failing to
recognise your image in their faces. Help us see where we have wronged
you by abusing your image.

Give us grace to rejoice in the rainbow of culture, language and ethnicity
by which you have enriched humanity. Give us humility to repent
when we have failed to recognise Christ in others. Amen.

For after the viewing of the film

Loving God,
We have seen your people hurt and crying.
We have heard how your institutions broke
people created in your image.

After a time of noise, and information, we turn to you in silence.
Offering our thoughts, our questions and our pain.

Be with us in the silence.
Then guide our conversation,
so we move into action, not just from our head,
but following your heart. Amen.

Lord God, we stand in silence, shame but also in hope because of your grace and mercy.
Oh God, we have sinned when we have treated others as less valuable, when we have used and abused others for our own benefits.

Silence

We lament with the families of our Black brothers and sisters who have been discriminated, devalued or treated differently because of the colour of their skin. Forgive us when we think that we deserve our wealth and our privilege more than others. Forgive us for creating and maintaining a system where some members of the human race have been treated unjustly because of their ethnicity or skin colour. Forgive us for ways we have profited from a biased justice system that puts Black people behind bars while others go free.

God of justice, help us through the power of your Holy Spirit to act justly towards all people. Help us to love our neighbours whatever the colour of their skin. Forgive us for the things we have done and things we have left undone: a disdainful look, ignoring job applications, questioning another's competency, turning a blind eye to continued discrimination, justifying our positions, refusing to seek out and include diverse voices, our unwillingness to learn from our fellow Black brothers and sisters. We lament when we have excluded and ignored the cries of injustice that our Black brothers and sisters have been calling out for years.

We thank you that in Christ, we can come before the throne of grace and receive mercy and forgiveness. we lay our sins and shame before the Mercy seat. God, thank you for you are still reconciling the world to yourself through Christ. Amen.

Before a time for reflection and conversation

Holy God, we come to you as your people, made in your image, each worthy of equal value and dignity. We mourn and lament people who were enslaved, people whose humanity was denied. We ask your forgiveness for times in the past when the Church was silent in the face of exploitation.

Be with us as we explore the Church's historical involvement in the transatlantic traffic in enslaved Africans, as we seek routes to reconciliation and repair. May our praying, learning and speaking be guided by your grace and wisdom.

Teach us how to reinterpret and re-evaluate the past,
and how to understand what it means for our present,
as we long to become a justice-seeking Church. Amen.

Before sending out

God of love, send us out to live, to love and care as you do.
By your grace, help us to see your creation as you do.
Help and teach us how to stand for justice,
for justice is what love look like.
In the name of the universal God
who loves through Jesus. Amen.

Supporting Reflection and Conversation

How could you help your church or group to reflect on the issues raised by *After the Flood*? Some of this may depend on the size of your group, whether they were aware of these issues beforehand, and how members choose to engage.

Issues raised by the film might be upsetting or traumatic particularly for those who may be descendants of enslaved people. Therefore it is strongly advised that any conversations are not framed as issues to be debated or challenged, and instead are offered as opportunities to listen to each other and learn together.

Some ways of responding to the film are offered below.

Prayer

As we are coming together as Christians, the event should be held in prayer. A number of prayers have been written particularly for these sessions, but you could invite people to pray together in small groups, or to offer prayer together before or after the film, or to hold a time of silence.

Wondering

In small groups invite people to reflect on some questions:

- What surprised me?
- What did I learn?
- What questions do I have?
- What more do I want to know?
- What might we do next?

Invite groups to write their questions on sheets of paper and then explore them together.

Panel

Some churches have invited a panel to respond to the film, not in the form of a debate, but rather to ask people with different voices or experiences to share their responses and invite questions from the audience.

Creativity

Invite people to make a creative response to what they saw in the film and the questions and emotions it has provoked. This might be in the form of a poem or a piece of writing, in individual pictures, or in a shared collage.

Conversation

You could use these questions to begin conversations:

- What were you taught about slavery and abolition? What was missing?
- How does the biblical justification of slavery sit with the belief that all people are made in the image of God?
- Where do we see the lingering ripples of slavery in British society and around the world? Where do you see yourself in this story?
- Are there systems today that feel too big and pervasive that we cannot challenge them?
- What examples are there of 'reparations' – repair of relationships, restoration or putting things right – in the Bible? What might we learn from these about repentance, forgiveness and justice?
- How can we move towards repentance, reparation and reconciliation for slavery? As a British state? As the Methodist Church?

Respond

In 2021, the Methodist Conference formally recognised the impact and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade on enslaved African people and their descendants. This legacy includes the inequalities faced by Black and brown people in Britain today. British society continues to benefit from the wealth generated by slavery. The Methodist Church would have benefited from the transatlantic slave trade, irrespective of any direct involvement of individuals within the Church.

Therefore, the Methodist Conference is currently looking at the extent to which the Church benefited directly or indirectly from the transatlantic slave trade and will bring a report to the Conference in 2026. It is studying the full breadth of reparations required for the injustices suffered by enslaved people, and exploring the scope of any public statements including any apology.

As part of this, the Church invites individuals and groups to join in a conversation by sharing responses to the question page below. Please complete the online form at **Methodist.org.uk/AfterTheFlood** or share the questions below, gather together people's responses, and submit a group response on their behalf.

A one-page attendees handout with the questions is available for download at **Methodist.org.uk/AfterTheFlood**

Question 1

Have you watched the film, *After the Flood*, which was promoted during Black History Month? **Yes/No**

If so, what was the key thing you learned from the film?

Question 2

Where do you see the legacies of slavery in British society and around the world?

Where do you see yourself in this story?

Question 3

What examples are there of 'reparations' – repair of relationships, restoration or putting things right – in the Bible? What might we learn from these about repentance, forgiveness and justice?

Question 4

If we benefit where historic injustice lingers in modern inequality, we are called to make restitution.

From 'A Justice-seeking Church', Report to the 2023 Methodist Conference

What do you think is ours to do in response to the injustices and legacies of slavery as the Methodist Church in Britain in terms of:

Repentance?

Reparation?

Reconciliation?

Thank you for your contribution. You can keep in touch with this conversation at
Methodist.org.uk/AfterTheFlood

Further Resources and Sources of Information

For further resources and FAQs, visit Methodist.org.uk/AfterTheFlood

After the Flood: the Church, Slavery and Reconciliation – A Workbook

Available at mjr-uk.com/news/new-after-the-flood-workbook

We will Repay: the Biblical Case for Reparations

Baptists Together, the Racial Justice Advocacy Forum, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland ctbi.org.uk/wewillrepay

CARICOM plan for reparatory justice

caricom.org/caricom-ten-point-plan-for-reparatory-justice/

International Slavery Museum, Liverpool

liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/international-slavery-museum

Other denominations thinking about these issues

Quakers in Britain – quaker.org.uk/resources/reparations/resources-to-support-exploration

United Reformed Church: Legacies of Slavery – urc.org.uk/who-we-are/what-we-do/legacies-of-slavery/

Church of England – churchofengland.org/historic-links-to-enslavement

Baptist Union – baptist.org.uk/Articles/506587/The_Apology_Ten.aspx

Novels

Washington Black by Esi Edugyan (Serpent's Tail, 2019)

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi (Penguin, 2017)

The Book of Night Women by Marlon James (Riverside Books, 2010)

Small Island by Andrea Levy (Tinder Press, 2009)

The Long Song by Andrea Levy (Tinder Press, 2011)

Acknowledgements

Thanks are expressed to: *The Revd Derek CO Browne, John Cooper, Prof Charles Forsdick, Dr Clive Murray Norris, Richard Reddie, the Revd Wale Hudson Roberts, the Revd Dr Martin Wellings and members of the Methodist Church's Reparations Advisory Group*

Note

Text for 'Methodism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade' is based on the entry for 'Slavery' in the online *DMBI: A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*. Original text and sources linked at dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=2502. Some of the wording in this text has been altered from the original to replace outdated terminology. Discussions on the preferred language concerning enslaved people is ongoing and advice will be added to the Inclusive Language Guide. Also, copy was added to enhance the content from methodistchurchantigua.org/our-history. We are grateful for the kind permission of the Editor of the DMBI and to the Methodist Church of Antigua and Barbuda to reuse their texts in this way.

If you would like to request this resource in an alternative format, please contact us to discuss your needs at publishing@methodistchurch.org.uk

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