

Healing, Repair and Justice

The Report of the Oversight Group set up by the Church Commissioners

In 2023, the Church Commissioners, the financing arm of the Church of England, published their Research Into Historic Links To Transatlantic Chattel Slavery. This acknowledged the Church's historic complicity in trafficking in enslaved Africans through the profits it made from a fund known as Queen Anne's Bounty, which was established in 1704, by Queen Anne to help poor Anglican clergy. This fund, invested in African chattel enslavement took donations derived from investments made by the Church in the South Sea Company.

As Dr Helen Paul, one of the historical advisers to the research team wrote:

The South Sea Company was formed as an integral part of the early modern British state. It was designed from the outset as a slaving company. It shipped enslaved human beings across the Atlantic in terrible conditions. It operated as a slaver for several decades during the first half of the 18th century. Its investors were well aware of this. Some of them reinvested their wealth in charitable activities. This includes donations to the Church of England and the Queen Anne's Bounty fund.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, as Chair of the Church Commissioners, announced that, in an effort to "address past wrongs", the Church Commissioners' board is to set up a £100m fund to deliver a programme of investment, research and engagement over the next nine years. The Church of England is to form an "oversight group ... with significant membership from communities impacted by historic slavery" to ensure the Church's response is carried out "sensitively and with accountability".

This is that report. it starts by saying that the fund would be "*Black led and guided by its engagement with communities descended from enslaved Africans*". This does not give any control of the fund to these African descended communities, thus the money remains firmly in the hands of the Church Commissioners. They are quite specific about this, saying that the fund: "*will invest in members of disadvantaged Black communities, as recommended by the Oversight Group and endorsed by the Church Commissioners. It will aim to back their most brilliant social entrepreneurs, educators, healthcare givers, asset managers and historians*". In this paragraph, we see the totally pro-business orientation of the fund, nothing here for workers or poor farmers. This approach will enrich the African Caribbean bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie and the workers will be lucky to get crumbs from the table.

There is the pious hope that "*The governance and grant structures of the fund will reflect Christian theology and African-centred ethical values that respect human*

dignity and nurture human flourishing", but no sense of giving the descendants of enslaved Africans any real control or responsibility as the Church will make the final decisions. What happens if Christian theology and African-centred ethical values prove to be in contradiction? African-centred ethical values of the 17th to 19th Centuries were very different from the ethical values of today which have been distorted by two or three hundred years of Christian influence and interference in Africa and the Caribbean? There is little recognition of the validity of pre-Christian cultural and religious practices destroyed by colonialism and enslavement.

The report admits that "*£100 million will be insufficient for this purpose. The Church Commissioners have therefore embraced a target of £1bn for a broader healing*". Note the wording "*embraced a target of £1bn*", nothing about increasing the offer above the £100 million, which is chicken-feed compared to the modern value of the money the report has identified as coming from the profits of investments in the South Sea Company. In the period 1708–1793, that income amounted to £633,946. By the method the report used to convert contemporary sums into modern-day terms, the Labour Earnings index on the Measuring Worth website, the modern day value of this would be £1,361,000,000.

Despite admitting the inadequacy of the fund, even for the limited purposes for which it is established, the report, rather than demanding more from the Church, states that "*Our aspiration is that it will invest boldly in Black-led businesses whose brilliance will shame a financial sector that has shunned them. We foresee its grants energising social entrepreneurs and philanthropists*". The Oversight Group have clearly been told that £100 million is all the money that is available placing the responsibility for the growth of the fund on the social entrepreneurs and asset managers who the Church itself will select. This theme is present throughout the report.

Thus, "*The Commissioners expressed the hope that the fund would grow, reinvesting returns to foster a perpetual, positive legacy*". "Hope" is not a good strategy to make a fund grow. Increasing the size of the Church's contribution would be a much surer way of ensuring growth. In fact this is very dangerous as it places the responsibility for the growth of the fund on the *social entrepreneurs, educators, healthcare givers, asset managers* that the Church itself will select. Note that "*During its early years, the Fund will benefit from the support of the Church Commissioners, via their expertise, credibility and organisational excellence. In time, The Fund for Healing, Repair and Justice may become independent*". Note the conditional "may", so presumably only becoming independent if they behave themselves.

This is philanthropy at its worst. Such charity allows the perpetrator to determine the amount and the manner in which the profits of their crimes are distributed. The Church decides on worthy recipients, not the descendants of the enslaved.

Esther Stanford-Xosei has argued:

“Reparations basically have to be determined by victims, meaning affected communities, the descendants of enslaved people.

There is a CARICOM Reparations Committee headed by Sir Hilary Beckles, Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies. It would show much more sincere repentance if they were to begin negotiations with this Committee.

None of this is surprising as the majority of the Oversight Group work in the upper levels of the financial services industry. Their influence in the composition of the report can be shown by the prevalence of the language of venture capital, entrepreneurship, investment and philanthropy:

Leveraging networks will be key to capturing better investment opportunities and efficiencies.

We thus propose the fund build Black-led venture partner networks, of 10-20 initial social impact leaders in key markets.

the fund's broader ethos of stakeholder capitalism and shared value creation networks of Black impact investors and venture philanthropists ... can bring pipeline and ensure co-investment and follow-on funding for investments

Yet even the acknowledgement of past sins and a modest move towards Reparations has produced objections and outrage within the Church of England. Reverend Ian Paul, says the recommendation is based on a ‘racist reading of history’; surely this is turning reality on its head. But then he shows his colours “It will imperil local ministry and mission. Why would ordinary churchgoers continue to give to their local church when it appears we have these vast sums to throw around?”. When Caribbean Labour Solidarity met a representative of the Church Commissioners, as part of a delegation from the TUC, we were told that they had received abusive messages from Church employees who were opposed to reparations and worried about their stipends. The conservative wing of the Church will therefore dread the future revelations arising from:

The Church Commissioners will separately fund research to uncover the full involvement of the Church Commissioners and the Church of England in African chattel enslavement.. The subject: the historic links with enslavement

within The Church of England. This could be at the level of parishes, dioceses or the Commissioners themselves.

While this would be a very useful exercise, it would need a fight to include the ideological role that Church of England teaching played in justifying enslavement and attempting to reconcile enslaved Africans to their lot and to discourage resistance. Although later it does say: *There is a duty to explain all aspects of the Church of England's complicity (and that of its clergy and associated mission organisations). The scope of this research should be financial, spiritual, theological, political. It should cover the enslavement and emancipation and postemancipation period, from West Africa to the Americas.*

There is little in this report that will do anything to improve the lot of workers or poor farmers of African heritage, either in the UK or in the Caribbean. There is no indication that any of the fund will in any way benefit or help develop the countries of the Caribbean. It seems likely that the overwhelming bulk of the money will be used in the UK to raise more money, to then be used to raise yet more in the endless cycle of accumulation that is the basis of capitalism.

The report starts with the quotation from Isaiah 58:12: *'You shall be called the Repairer of the Breach.'*

A much better biblical quotation would be Matthew 25:29: *"For unto those that have, more shall be given, but from those that have not, even that which they have shall be taken away".*

The Church of England, as the established church, is part of the British State. It certainly acted as part of the State in the ideological support it gave to the enslavement of African labour. It is the first time a report from an official body has acknowledged the crime of slavery and offered, however half-heartedly, some form of Reparations. This is the first crack in the wall and should encourage the Reparations movement to greater effort.

There is also a warning. When we eventually get near to winning the fight for Reparations, we shall need to be extra vigilant to ensure that any money is used to the benefit of all the descendents of the enslaved Africans and for real development programmes for the Caribbean, otherwise they will launder the money back into the financial services industry, enriching the already rich, while the poor see no benefit. The best way to achieve that would be to build a mass movement uniting workers in the Caribbean with workers in Britain.

