

THE BETHELSDORP STATEMENT

Restore! Release! Redeem!

Council for World Mission Statement in the Act of Repentance and the Onesimus Project Launch
August 23, 2022.

Background

The Council for World Mission is a global mission organisation with its roots in the UK's colonial Christian history. It grew out of the London Missionary Society, founded in 1795, but was reborn from the decolonising Spirit of the 1970s. Since then, CWM has lived out its calling to sharing resources, people, and ideas in mission as equal partners committed to life-flourishing community. But the hopes of the decolonial era have not been realised in full. The system which colonised and enslaved the global South, especially Africa and peoples of African descent in the diaspora, continues to exploit and to rob. The systems which stole land from indigenous people, indentured Indians, and Pacific Islanders continue to steal from their children, making them captive to economic forces they cannot control. The International Labour Organisation estimates that as many as 40.3 million people are kept in modern-day slavery. The systems set up by the institutions of the post-colonial global North capitalise on vulnerable members of marginalised communities, and the racism and supremacism which powered the colonial era remains as forceful today as ever.

CWM has come to see that these injustices are deeply rooted not just in the colonial era but in the missionary endeavour itself, complicit by its use of false theologies of race and civilisation to spur fundraising, recruitment, and action. Our work on our archive shows how long and how deeply LMS wove White supremacy and Afrophobia into its work and witness. Since its formation in 1977, the CWM has aimed to discontinue the mission understanding and practice of LMS and start anew with its commitment and action based on the equal partnership of churches in mission. However, we realise that our journey of transformation is not complete unless we address and confess the legacies and persistent influence of the LMS, our forbearer, whose understanding and practice of mission was responsible for allowing racist attitudes to take root globally. We also realise, in the face of modern-day slavery, that our silence betrays our commitment to justice, mutuality, and equality.

This realisation demands that we, as the CWM, confess our sin and commit to repentant action through the Onesimus Project. It is vital for authentic and transformed discipleship that the Christian community resists racism, owns its culpability, addresses the legacies of enslavement still in our midst, including the ongoing practice of enslavement, and challenges those who profit still from this sin. Only in this way can we be true to Christ's gospel charge to **Restore! Release! Redeem!**

Our Act of Confession

CWM comes to Bethelsdorp, South Africa, to make its act of confession and commitment because it was one of the first mission stations of LMS. Bethelsdorp was founded to pose a gospel challenge against the racist practices of the colonial settlers, and for a time, it existed as a radical community where enslavement was banned and White and Black people lived freely together. This proved too radical for LMS and for the colonial powers; the community was dismantled in a familiar pattern of White Christian supremacism. But from this community, Black evangelists came forward who recognised in Jesus, not a White saviour bearing a European cultural hegemony but a Palestinian Messiah proclaiming an anti-imperial vision of liberation and the fullness of life for the oppressed. Their witness became the early seeds of liberative hope that laid the foundations for this nation's struggles against the sin of apartheid. We gather to recognise and rejoice in this.

Our Commitment

CWM committed itself in 2019 to acts of apology, repentance, and reparation for the legacies of slavery in our life. The CWM Board provided £10 million to enable this initiative. Now, in the Onesimus Project, it has outlined the key aspects of this reparatory commitment and action. We seek to work with member churches and our partners to resist the ongoing evils of racism and modern-day slavery. The story of Onesimus challenges us to see that Christianity has been called since the beginning to fight against enslaving systems but has regularly been co-opted by the power of the empire to enslave others.

CWM gathers on Aug 23, 2022, the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, to repent, to repair these evils, and to offer there an act of apology to African and African-descended peoples for the sin of racism then and now.

Our Onesimus Covenant commits us to these actions:

Repent for the silence in the face of the historic and continuing racist exploitation and enslavement of people;

Make reparation to empower those peoples and communities sinned against through racism and enslavement;

Reject the historic and endemic privileges afforded by racism and the legacies of colonisation;

Rebuild life-affirming relationships and communities which honour the interdependency of all creation;

Challenge other institutions with a compromising history like ours to deliver reparation, racial justice, and equity;

Create communities that resist racism and enslavement, honouring the image of God in all people;

Arise with those leading the work for reparation and system change.

–taken from the CWM Onesimus Covenant

Our Calls

CWM is not alone in having these legacies in its life, and we call on other churches and mission movements with similar legacies to do the same: they too must repent and make reparation. The legacies of slavery and the profits of modern-day slavery challenge the followers of Christ, who began by confronting imperial profit and violence, to ensure they are first in seeking to **Restore! Release! Redeem!**

We call on the former colonial powers and structures whose deep debt to the global South continues to grow because of their failure to make reparation for the wrongs of four hundred years under colonisation and for the creation of financial and economic systems that preserve and prosper their profit and power. The Onesimus Project will move CWM to confront and challenge these powers and institutions, whose power and profit are the reasons Christ stands against them, demanding, **Restore! Release! Redeem!**

Having heard from those who live daily with the legacies of slavery, we call on our ecumenical and mission partners, and we call on the power systems, institutions, nations, and corporations who have grown out of the profits of enslavement to **Restore! Release! Redeem!**

Racism and slavery are sin.

Words are not enough.

Apologies are not enough.

Only change is enough.

Restore! Release! Redeem!