

JOINT REPORT OF THE FAITH ACTION PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP TEAM, THE ASSEMBLY TRUSTEES AND THE THEOLOGICAL FORUM ON THE LEGACIES OF SLAVERY MAY 2026

Proposed Deliverance

The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.
2. Adopt the Apology for the Church of Scotland's historical involvement in transatlantic chattel slavery (*Section 2*).
3. Affirm that the Apology forms part of a wider journey of repentance, justice and reconciliation, and that its integrity will be demonstrated through sustained action: work that is intentional, focused, reparative and measurable in its impact (*Sections 7.0.1-7.1.2*).
4. Instruct the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team, in consultation with the Assembly Trustees, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group and the Theological Forum, to establish a working group to identify the appropriate actions arising from this Apology in partnership with those who continue to be affected and bring recommendations to the General Assembly of 2027 (*Sections 7.1.3-7.1.5*).
5. Encourage congregations and Presbyteries to continue engaging with this work through education, reflection, and local exploration of historical and contemporary legacies, ensuring that particular attention is given to listening to and supporting those within our Church and communities for whom the legacies of slavery and racism are not historical abstractions but lived realities (*Section 7.1.5*).
6. Commend the listening, consultation, and ecumenical engagement undertaken since the General Assembly of 2023, including the Ecumenical Pilgrimage to Jamaica in 2024 (*Section 3*).
7. Record its thanks to the members of the Legacies of Slavery Group for their diligence and faithful service and discharge the Group.

Executive Summary

This Report presents a proposed Apology for the Church's historical involvement in transatlantic chattel slavery and its enduring consequences. It acknowledges theological justification of slavery, direct and indirect participation in slave-dependent economies, and the material benefits derived from enslaved labour, recognising the lasting racial injustice and inequality that resulted.

The Report invites the General Assembly to adopt the Apology as part of a wider journey of repentance, justice, and reconciliation. It proposes the establishment of a working group to identify appropriate actions in partnership with affected communities, with recommendations to be brought to the General Assembly of 2027. Congregations and Presbyteries are encouraged to continue engaging in education, reflection, and local exploration of historical and contemporary legacies.

Grounded in a commitment to racial justice and informed by consultation and ecumenical engagement – including the 2024 Ecumenical Pilgrimage to Jamaica – this work represents an intentional and measurable step toward truth-telling, accountability, and repair.

Report

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In 2023, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland received a Report examining the Church's historical ties to the chattel enslavement of Africans. In response, the General Assembly agreed a deliverance committing the Church to prepare a statement of acknowledgement and Apology to be brought to a future Assembly. This commitment arose from a growing recognition that the harm inflicted upon generations of Africans, and their descendants has not only contributed to the material inequalities that persist in the world today, but has also shaped the Church itself, both spiritually and materially. This statement of acknowledgment and Apology is presented to the General Assembly of 2026 by the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team, in partnership with the Equality Diversity and Inclusion group and the Theological Forum. This Report contextualises the wording of the Apology and adds background information to explain the process that brought us to this point.

2. THE APOLOGY

2.1 We, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, acknowledging our corporate and continuing identity with those who have gone before us, and acknowledging responsibility for the actions and failures of some of our past members and office-holders, confess the following;

2.2 That theological justification was offered for race-based slavery.

2.3 That race-based slavery was defended on moral grounds.

2.4 That, even when we were not attempting to justify it, we – individually and collectively – treated slavery as normal, which, as we know now (and should have known then), helps to perpetuate injustice.

2.5 That, after slavery was outlawed in Scotland, some members of the Church of Scotland, including some of our office-holders, continued to own slaves overseas.

- 2.6** That, after the abolition of the slave trade in the British colonies, some of our office-holders and other members lobbied against the emancipation of persons already enslaved or for delaying their emancipation.
- 2.7** That for years many of our office-holders and other members derived their income directly or indirectly from slave labour. Some of our members travelled to the British and American colonies to work as foremen who enforced enslavement, punished those who objected to their enslavement, and made possible the day-to-day extraction of uncompensated labour from unwilling hands. Some owned or worked in tobacco distribution or textile manufacture that depended on crops planted and picked by slaves. Some owned or worked in sugar sheds, refining and distributing sugar grown by slaves in the colonies. Some owned or worked in shipyards that provided the vessels required for shipping goods and people across the Atlantic.
- 2.8** That office-holders and members of the Church of Scotland inherited wealth from relatives who owned slaves, and this money contributed to the building of the universities that trained our ministers and the churches in which we gathered to worship. Some of those buildings are still in use and still contain plaques or windows dedicated to the memory of benefactors that profited from slavery.
- 2.9** That, when slaves were finally emancipated in the Caribbean, some of our officer-holders and other members received government compensation for the 'property' they had 'lost.'
- 2.10** That we did not return the money that had been extracted from the labour of the enslaved. Nor did we build the infrastructure or provide the opportunities emancipated slaves would need to flourish.
- 2.11** That, after enslavement was outlawed and the enslaved were set free, too many of our office-holders and members acted as though the wrongs of slavery were a thing of the past, ignoring the ongoing harms suffered daily by the descendants of those whose labour was stolen, whose lives were ruined, whose cultures and languages were trampled, whose identities as children of God were denied.
- 2.12** That the racism which was manifested in trans-Atlantic slavery is not yet a thing of the past in either our society or in the Church of Scotland.
- 2.13** We, the Church of Scotland, are sorry for the ways in which the Church of Scotland, collectively and individually, contributed to and benefitted from the enslavement of people of African descent. We are grieved beyond telling by the extraordinary suffering we have inflicted – through our actions and our inaction – on our brothers and sisters. As bearers of God's image loved by God, they should have been loved by us. Not only did we fail to love them, we failed to treat them with basic human respect. We repent, committing ourselves to changing course and bearing fruit worthy of repentance.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Racial Justice

3.1.1 The Church of Scotland's engagement with the legacies of transatlantic chattel slavery is fundamentally a matter of racial justice. This was made explicit by the General Assembly in 2020, when it commissioned examination of the Church's historical links to slavery and their contemporary consequences. That mandate recognised slavery not merely as an economic or historical system, but as a racialised order that constructed hierarchies of human worth whose effects persist today. Subsequent work, including the 2023 *Legacies of Slavery* Report and the commitments arising from it, is grounded in this moral and spiritual framework.

3.1.2 Chattel slavery was built on the invention of race to justify treating human beings as commodities. It denied the humanity of African people, treating them as property valued only for their capacity to generate wealth based on their skin colour. The Church's members' and office-holders' participation in, and failure to sufficiently challenge, this exploitation was underpinned by theological distortion. Scripture was misused to legitimise racial hierarchy, and people of African descent were denied recognition as bearers of God's image. These legacies continue to shape material inequality, social relations, and ecclesial life, including within the Church.

3.1.3 In Scotland, the legacy of slavery has often appeared less visible because the plantation economy was located overseas, encouraging narratives of distance and exceptionalism. However, renewed public attention in 2020 prompted deeper scrutiny of institutional histories, inherited privilege, and memorials to enslavers in civic and church spaces, exposing the evidence and persistence of racialised hierarchies rooted in slavery.

3.1.4 In an overwhelmingly White society, and amid a growing backlash against confronting historical injustice, there is a risk of complacency. The Church's task is therefore to remain attentive and faithful: resisting minimisation, examining how these legacies continue to shape structures and attitudes, and translating moments of moral clarity into constructive, transformative work. The question is sometimes asked why the Church should concern itself with events that took place centuries ago. From a theological perspective, the answer is clear. The Church is formed around lives lived two thousand years ago and a cross that continues to speak across time to sin, repentance, and hope. The Cross testifies that the passage of time does not diminish moral responsibility, nor does it render suffering irrelevant where its consequences endure. To ask "why now?" is therefore not a neutral historical query, but a theological one – and the Christian answer is that truth-telling and repentance remain necessary wherever injustice is revealed.

3.2 Timeline

3.2.1 The 2023 General Assembly Report set out the Church's historical connections with slavery and the Caribbean and their continuing impact on Church life. Read alongside the Church's 2021–23 research into the experiences of people of minority ethnic backgrounds, the General Assembly recognised the clear and troubling links between historical injustice and contemporary experience.^[1]

3.2.2 The 2023 General Assembly therefore instructed the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team, the Theological Forum and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group, to prepare a statement of acknowledgement and Apology for the Church's involvement in chattel slavery, to be brought to a future Assembly. Initial work was undertaken through the Racial Justice strand of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group, in partnership with the Public Life and Social Justice Programme Group and the Theological Forum, with an initial target of May 2025.

3.2.3 In spring 2024, Church representatives took part in an ecumenical pilgrimage to Jamaica, engaging with partners developing shared approaches to repair in response to the legacies of slavery. This deepened the Church's learning and located the proposed Apology within a wider international and ecumenical conversation.

3.2.4 Alongside this, wider engagement took place across the Church, including presentations to Presbyteries. By late 2024, it was clear that a dedicated, time-bound task group, drawing representation from all three bodies, was needed to take the work forward. It was therefore proposed that the presentation of the statement be delayed by one year to allow for this group's formation and further consultation.

3.3 Stakeholders

The task group has engaged with several stakeholders inside and outwith the Church of Scotland.

3.3.1 Internal

- Those of African heritage within the Church
- Presbyteries, Church members, elders and all those in recognised ministries
- Assembly Trustees
- Principal Clerk
- Senior staff leadership team as well as individual departments within the central services.

3.3.2 External

3.3.3.1 Our international stakeholders include the Churches' Reparations Action Forum (CRAF), a Jamaican ecumenical body which bridges the Jamaican Government's work on reparations with Church leaders. CRAF have developed a seven-point Reparations Plan to address the enduring impact and trauma of enslavement in the Caribbean and diaspora. They led the Ecumenical Pilgrimage to Jamaica in which the Church of Scotland participated during Spring 2024. Our partner churches in the Caribbean, the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands (UCJCI) and the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad and Tobago, are likewise significant external stakeholders.

3.3.2.2 Other UK-based external stakeholders who have expertise in reparatory justice issues include; Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI); the Racial Justice Advocacy Forum; and Christian Aid. Beginning in 2021, the Church of Scotland was a founding member of the Europe Roundtable on Legacies of Slavery, Colonialism and Racism and has participated in ecumenical conversations on repair and reconciliation. The Church has since regularly contributed to ecumenical conversation on the topic of repair and reconciliation.

3.4 Whole Church Response

3.4.1 In line with the 2023 General Assembly deliverance, which called for any apology to be shaped by and representative of the whole Church, the Legacies of Slavery Task Group undertook a programme of presentations and open sessions across the Church.

3.4.2 Reflections from presbyteries and open sessions directly shaped the drafting of the Apology. While many participants stressed that this work requires long-term, intergenerational commitment, others raised concerns about the timing and perceived relevance of an apology for the contemporary Church of Scotland.

3.4.3 Across these discussions, participants consistently emphasised that an apology is a start not an endpoint, and must be accompanied by visible, sustained efforts to repair harm and build solidarity grounded in equality, fairness, and historical and contemporary understanding. Redemption and reconciliation were understood not only as moral responsibilities but as expressions of faith.^[iii]

3.5 Acknowledgment of Limitations, Internal Diversity and Power Dynamics

3.5.1 There is an inherent imbalance in how the legacy of slavery is addressed within the Church. It is neither just nor appropriate for those most harmed – particularly members of African descent within the Church and wider community – to bear the primary burden of explaining its significance to a largely White membership. Responsibility for understanding, naming, and responding to this legacy rests with the institution and, in practice, with its White majority.

3.5.2 At the same time, institutional ownership must not marginalise the voices of those most affected. The Church's account of its past and present must be shaped with, not merely about, members and communities of African descent. Ownership by the White majority must not become a means of controlling the narrative or centring White comfort.

3.5.3 A further limitation of this Apology concerns the scope of our responsibility. While we must be clear about the history in which we had agency, we must also avoid re-centring White European actors as though they alone shaped the story. We recognise that there is sensitivity not only around how an apology is framed, but also around how this history is narrated and whose agency is acknowledged within it. The Task Group has heard from African voices who highlighted the breadth and complexity of dynamics within the African continent, including systems of enslavement and social stratification that both pre-dated, co-existed with and ultimately fed into European involvement in the transatlantic trade. Our responsibility is to account for the part in which we were implicated: the theological, economic, and racial frameworks that enabled and justified chattel slavery across the Atlantic. As a Church that is still majority White, we take ownership of the racism that underpinned and defended that system – a legacy whose effects continue to be felt today.

3.5.4 In the church of the past, as in the church of today, power and agency were unevenly distributed. During the period addressed by this Apology, some individuals exercised significant influence, made deliberate choices, and accumulated substantial wealth through direct or indirect connections to slavery. The Task Group recognises that their power and responsibility cannot be equated with that of poorer people in Scotland whose labour or livelihoods were tied to industries connected to the slave economy, but who lacked meaningful power, choice, or benefit. At the same time, the legacy of slavery cannot be weighed only at the level of individual gain or blame. Even where many people did not become wealthy themselves, slavery contributed to shaping Scotland as a whole—through infrastructure, institutions, and patterns of material advantage that outlasted those directly involved. The same is true within the Church. The impact of slavery is not visible or felt in the same way everywhere, and it is not written into every building or local history. Yet it has shaped the life of the Church collectively, in both visible and invisible ways. This broader shaping is why a shared reckoning is required: not because responsibility is equal, but because the legacy has formed the whole body, and continues to influence who we are today.

3.5.5 An apology for slavery is necessarily limited. The Church can acknowledge its actions, omissions, and structural failures, but cannot fully capture the lived experience, intergenerational loss, or ongoing trauma of those affected. Gaps in research and the fact that slavery was not legally criminal for most of its history mean much of the Church's involvement remains unclear. These limits do not lessen the need for apology; they call for humility, attentiveness, and a willingness to listen. The credibility of the apology therefore rests not on saying everything, but on how it is offered: listening attentively, caring about what we hear, continuing to learn, and acting in a way that shows we mean what we say.

4. THEOLOGICAL PRECEDENT AND FRAMEWORK OF THE APOLOGY

4.0.1 Much of the theological reasoning behind the relevance of contemporary apologies for historical wrongs was prepared in a 2022 paper by the Theological Forum.^[iii] Additionally, the Group's engagement with presbyteries and other stakeholders has highlighted several distinctive and recurring theological questions and concerns that warrant further exploration. Drawing both on the 2022 paper and subsequent discussions, the Task Group have prepared the following theological groundwork that underlies the Apology.

4.1 Theology of Apology

'So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift' (Matthew 5:23-24).

4.1.1 In Matthew 5, Jesus makes clear to his disciples that anger, acrimony, and estrangement are not things we should simply accept as ordinary parts of everyday life. We should not mistake our own anger for righteousness. Nor should we rest easy if we are the object of someone else's anger. Instead, we should drop whatever we are doing – even if we are in the midst of prayer, or worship, or some other expression of our devotion to God – and make being reconciled with that person our top priority.

4.1.2 Jesus' prayer for his disciples was that they would be known by their love.^[iv] Sometimes we almost live up to this calling, but all too often we fall short, sometimes markedly so. When we fail to love as we ought, our calling persists. How do we love our neighbour after we have hurt them? How do we love those whose hurts we have ignored?

4.1.3 Jesus does not go on in Matthew 5 to spell out the steps we should take to bring about reconciliation. However, in the intervening centuries the practice of offering an apology has become a key part of the process of seeking reconciliation. In most cases, an apology must begin by acknowledging our shortcomings and confessing our transgressions (sins, vices, misdeeds, guilty omissions, and other failures to live up to our calling to love our neighbour).^[v] The Church's understanding of when, how, and to whom our failings should be confessed has varied over the years.^[vi] Despite these variations, there is broad agreement across Christian traditions that we should confess our failings to four potential audiences: 1) the person we have wronged or offended, 2) God, 3) a priest, minister, elder, or other representative of the faith community, and 4) the whole community. Confessing our failings to the first of these audiences –

1. namely, the person we have wronged or offended – can perform many functions:
2. It can give the offended party information – about what we did, why we did it, what we thought it meant at the time, what we think it means now, etc.
3. It can express respect for the other person, indicating our awareness that they deserved better.
4. It can restore social balance, particularly in situations where confessing involves humbling oneself before someone we previously belittled (explicitly or implicitly).
5. It can indicate who we are and what can be expected of us, often by distancing our current self – with its commitment to shared understandings of who and what matters – from ourselves at an earlier moment where our actions belied such a commitment.
6. It can moderate offence and promote reconciliation.

4.1.4 Not every confession or apology needs to fulfil all these functions. In some cases, what matters most is the expression of respect rather than the provision of new information; in others, disclosure, self-redefinition, or the redressing of an imbalance may take priority. The form a good apology takes will depend on what is most needed in the particular relationship and moment.

4.1.5 Turning now to the second audience of an apology – God – there is a long tradition of seeing sin in all its forms as an offence against God,^[vii] and we are frequently enjoined to confess our failings to God.^[viii] In so doing, we are not giving God information God lacked, nor are we changing the power balance between us. Instead, our confession can serve the other functions identified above, and since God knows all our shortcomings, confessing to God can encourage naked honesty, even with ourselves.

4.1.6 In addition to God and the neighbour we have wronged, we are also enjoined to ‘confess our sins to one another.’^[ix] Although the Reformers departed from the medieval Church’s way of following this injunction, they continued to think confessing one’s failings to others a valuable part of Christian formation.^[x] This was reflected in Reformed liturgy (which includes a collective prayer of confession) and in the emerging practice of pastoral home visits which recontextualised the priestly confessional.^[xi] Confessing to another member of the Christian community invites them to join in the project of keeping us honest and encouraging our reform. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, it ‘is the God-given remedy for self-deception and self-indulgence,’ to which we are all too prone.^[xii]

4.1.7 Finally, some wrongs are so egregious, so widespread in their effects, or so publicly displayed that they call for a public confession.^[xiii] Public confession is not meant to be a showy performance of piety. Rather, it is intended to address those who might benefit from learning the transgressor now recognises their failings for what they were.

4.1.8 No matter its audience, confession should involve more than simple acknowledgement and ownership of past failings. It should also involve contrition.^[xiv] ‘A contrite heart is a precious thing,’ Luther observes.^[xv] If we do not lament our failure to love our neighbour and grieve the hurt they have suffered as a result, our recognition of our failings lacks a crucial ingredient.^[xvi] Part of loving our neighbour involves sympathising with them, rejoicing when they rejoice and weeping when they weep.^[xvii]

4.1.9 In addition to confession and contrition, we are also called to repentance.^[xviii] Having acknowledged our past failings, we need to reverse course and ‘bear fruit worthy of repentance.’^[xix] It is not enough to note we have wrongly caused or ignored another’s hurt, or to feel badly about who we have been or failed to be, what we have done or failed to do. We also need to stop causing or ignoring such hurt.^[xx] We need to commit ourselves to behaving differently in future.^[xxi] Our actions need to reflect that commitment.

4.2 Group apologies:

4.2.1 Group apologies involve the same elements as individual apologies, but there can be additional complexity due to questions around agency and blame. For many, there is an understandable impulse to argue that individuals cannot be held to account for the actions of other individuals. However, both in scripture and in our theological tradition, a less individualistic approach to moral responsibility can be found.

4.2.2 The Old Testament is, in no small part, a collection of stories about a group (most often described as the children of Israel or, simply, Israel) and their God (YHWH). The group is frequently spoken of as a person whose relationship with Yahweh continues over time even as generations of its members are born, grow old, and die. In the tradition’s oldest documents, the importance of group membership extends even to the punishment of groups for the actions of a small fraction of their members. The most vivid of these stories is of Achan, son of Carmi, who decided to take some silver and gold during the sacking of Jericho, despite having been instructed not to loot the city but to destroy everything within.^[xxii] Although the sin was Achan’s and he hid it from his companions, the writer tells us ‘The Israelites sinned.’

4.2.3 The New Testament also treats communities as morally accountable agents whose identity persists over time. Paul’s image of the Church as the body of Christ reinforces this shared responsibility: ‘we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another,’^[xxiii] and ‘if one part suffers, all suffer together; if one flourishes, all rejoice together.’^[xxiv] This understanding of the Church is also reflected in our doctrine, where the Church of Scotland’s Book of Confessions includes creeds that affirm our belief in ‘one holy catholic and apostolic Church.’^[xxv]

4.2.4 This unity is a crucial and defining aspect of our identity as the Church; we are invited in our scripture and in our theology to identify the Church not only with local congregations, but with the Church universal, across time and place. This means that we identify not only with the actions of present communities, but also with the Church’s past actions, in both faithfulness and failure. Our unity in Christ calls the Church to acknowledge wrongdoing, grieve the harm caused and to commit to repentance and change.

4.2.5 While questions around agency and blame continue to arise in group apologies, ‘not all apologies – not even all good apologies – are about accepting blame.’^[xxvi] Likewise, this Apology does not seek to assign personal blame to individuals living today. Sometimes, what makes a group apology meaningful is that it is a way for the group to stand in solidarity with victims. For those who have been harmed, the primary concern is not usually internal distinctions of responsibility but whether their suffering is recognised, respected, and taken seriously.

4.3 Historical Apologies

4.3.1 The work of the task group has been informed by a range of previous apologies (see additional information document) and acknowledgements made both within and beyond the Church of Scotland. These examples have provided important theological, pastoral, and practical insights into how institutions can acknowledge historical wrongs with honesty and humility.

4.3.2 Within the life of the Church of Scotland itself, past General Assemblies have authorised apologies to groups who were harmed through the Church’s actions, teaching, or silence. These include statements of regret or apologies relating to the Church’s treatment of people of Catholic-Irish heritage (2002),^[xxvii] LGBTQ+ people (2017),^[xxviii] those accused of witchcraft (2022),^[xxix] and Scottish Travellers (2025).^[xxx] The Church has also issued heartfelt apologies to all those children who were abused in care settings operated by the Church’s social care arm in past decades.^[xxxi] Each of these apologies emerged from different contexts and addressed distinct forms of harm and in different ways, but together they demonstrate an established willingness within the Church to name wrongdoing, to listen to those affected, and to seek reconciliation where trust has been broken.

4.3.3 Alongside these precedents, the task group has drawn on apologies issued by other denominations and parachurch organisations, particularly where they have addressed historical injustice, collective responsibility, and institutional complicity.

4.3.4 The Theological Forum’s 2022 paper helps clarify why historical apologies remain necessary, particularly when the harm experienced was not always the result of formal policy or explicit instruction. In many of the Church’s previous apologies, those harmed were affected not only by official actions, but by the attitudes, silences, and practices of church members who acted in ways that were widely tolerated, implicitly sanctioned, or insufficiently challenged. Although these actions were not always undertaken “in the name of the Church,” they nonetheless shaped people’s lived experience of the Church and, in some cases, led to alienation, discrimination, or direct harm. Historical apologies recognise this continuity of experience and responsibility. They acknowledge that institutions are formed not only by their declarations, but by what they allow, overlook, or fail to confront – and that the consequences of such failures can endure long after the original actions have ceased.

5. COMPLICITY

5.01 As the Church of Scotland looks back at its own role and that of its members in trans-Atlantic slavery, there are many things we need to admit and take responsibility for. Some of these wrongs were listed in a Report to the General Assembly in 2023.

5.02 While the Church itself did not own slaves or plantations, there were still ways that we – as a group or as individuals – failed to show love and care for others. Over the past two years, as we have worked with partners in the Caribbean, we have learned more about the suffering endured by our brothers and sisters, which continues to shape our relationship with them.

5.1 The ‘We’ of Our Apology

5.1.1 Our Apology begins with the words, “we, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland,” to make clear that it is offered by the Church’s highest governing body, speaking on behalf of this Church alone.

5.1.2 In speaking institutionally, the Apology encompasses the Church of Scotland in its historical and contemporary forms, including its governing bodies, office-holders (such as ministers, elders, and moderators), and its members, past and present.

5.1.3 Through the Church’s history of division and reunion, it inherited buildings, resources, and institutional legacies that reflect the theological commitments, social attitudes, and economic entanglements of their time, including connections to slavery and its economies.^[xxxii]

5.1.4 As a national church, the Church of Scotland has never existed in isolation. Its life has been interwoven with the wider social, political, economic, and religious structures of Scotland and the British Empire. Its responses to social and ethical questions therefore arise from a complex and layered history that resists simple explanation. These connections – some visible, others less so – mean that institutions and individuals have shaped and influenced one another in complex and often unrecorded ways. Our complex past forms part of who “we” are as a Church, even where responsibility is shared, diffused, or difficult to trace to a single source.

5.2 Actions or failures of the Church of Scotland

5.2.1 Belonging – to a community, a nation, or a Church – means inheriting obligations, stories, and moral debts we did not choose.^[xxxiii] The question is not whether we inherit these legacies, but how we respond to them: whether we tell stories that celebrate our faithfulness while also reckoning honestly with our failures.

5.2.2 Although British merchants were involved in the enslavement and trafficking of people from Africa from the 1550s, the Church of Scotland did not take a public stand on slavery until the end of the 18th century (1788).^[xxxiv] By that time, voices calling for abolition had already been active for decades. And even after condemning ‘the African slave trade’ for its ‘injustice and cruelty’ and declaring it ‘inconsistent with the great principles of religion and morality’ in 1792, the General Assembly still refused to petition Parliament to abolish it.^[xxxv] The 2023 Report names Ministers and Moderators who were directly engaged in chattel slavery – yet as far as our research has shown us, no disciplinary action was taken by the Church. Both during this period and subsequently, the Church of Scotland benefitted financially from the labour of enslaved persons, as documented extensively – but not exhaustively – in the Report received by the General Assembly in 2023. To briefly summarise it benefitted in two distinct ways. First, many individual ministers and kirk sessions received donations from persons whose profits came directly from plantations. Second, it received donations from persons whose profits came from industries and commerce adjacent to enslavement, such as boat building or importing and distribution of tobacco, cotton, rice and sugar. Income marked with the stamp of slavery added at least 11% of the United Kingdom’s gross domestic product during the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries. The Church of Scotland was not exempt. Among other things, profits from plantations funded the construction and decoration of sanctuaries for worship.^[xxxvi] and lecture halls to train ministers.^[xxxvii] Many are still in use today. The economic gains enjoyed in the UK came at a tremendous cost to Africa, Africans and the Caribbean, creating legacies of inequality and loss that are still felt today.

5.3 Actions and attitudes within the Church of Scotland

5.3.1 Evidence shows that ministers, moderators, and other influential figures within the Church of Scotland were directly implicated in the continuation and justification of transatlantic chattel slavery. Some clergy owned enslaved people themselves and continued to do so even after Scottish courts had ruled slavery morally and legally indefensible.^[xxxviii] Others defended policies that delayed emancipation well beyond the abolition of the slave trade.

5.3.2 In the early nineteenth century, prominent ministers argued that emancipation should be gradual to protect property rights. Rev. Thomas Chalmers, for example, contended that because property ownership was ‘sacred’, enslavers should not be deprived of their ‘property’ immediately.^[xxxix] Instead he proposed a system in which enslaved people would be paid for limited portions of their labour, allowing only the strongest and healthiest to purchase their own freedom over many years, and placing the burden of liberating family members on those already subjected to enslavement.^[xli] Such proposals prolonged forced labour, fractured families, and rendered freedom conditional, deferred, and unequal, causing lasting social, economic and psychological harm across generations.

5.3.3 Alongside these positions, some members of the Church sought to justify race-based slavery through distorted theological, philosophical, and pseudo-scientific arguments. Biblical narratives were misused to legitimise racial hierarchy, including appeals to the so-called ‘curse of Ham’^[xli] while others argued that Scripture did not explicitly prohibit slavery.^[xliii] The prevalence of these views was such that they were publicly contested within the General Assembly itself, notably in 1788, when Professor Andrew Hunter felt compelled to argue against them at length.^[xliii]

5.3.4 Others advanced claims that enslavement was beneficial to those enslaved, that the violence of capture, transportation, and plantation life was exaggerated, or that emancipation would lead to racial violence.^[xliv] Even apparently benevolent approaches could reinforce the same distortions, illustrating how Christian teaching could be severed from its ethical demands and made to serve an unjust status quo.^[xliv]

5.3.5 The Church of Scotland, though not formally established in the Caribbean in the same manner as the Church of England, acted as a trusted colonial partner, promoting gradual ‘moral improvement’ and ‘social stability’ without challenging existing social hierarchies.^[xlv] Contemporary accounts praised its clergy as guides for all social levels, emphasising patience and incremental reform.^[xlvii] The Colonial Church Union explicitly linked the Church to the ‘Establishment,’ by preventing dissent and unauthorised religious instruction among enslaved populations.^[xlviii]

5.3.6 Even after slavery was outlawed in Scots Law in 1778,^[xlix] members of the Church continued to enslave people, and profit from slavery, overseas. By the early nineteenth century, over 30 per cent of enslaved people in Jamaica were owned by Scots. These connections will inevitably have shaped attitudes back in Scotland as well as materially impacting our church, as has been shown in the Report to the General Assembly in 2023.

5.3.7 Taken together, these actions and attitudes represent more than isolated moral failure. They reveal a pattern in which Christian teaching was repeatedly distorted to defend economic interest, racial hierarchy, and social order at the expense of justice, compassion, and the clear ethical demands of the gospel. In doing so, the Church failed to recognise the full humanity of people of African descent as bearers of God’s image and neighbours to be loved, and instead participated in sustaining a system whose harms continue to echo in the present.

5.4 Post-Emancipation; colonialism and missionary activities

5.4.1 The history of the Church of Scotland’s engagement with the legacy of slavery after emancipation is complex. Most of the church office-holders and members who were outspoken in campaigning for abolition and emancipation were also active supporters of efforts to improve the lives and working conditions of the enslaved before *and* after emancipation.^[l] Their concern for these people, the communities in which they resided, and the regions from which they (or their ancestors) had been abducted did not evaporate with the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1833 or with its full implementation in 1838. As the 19th century progressed, this concern was increasingly channelled through missionary societies and the churches, schools, and hospitals they established.

5.4.2 The seeds of racism that were planted and ‘Christianised’ in the 17th and 18th centuries to justify the enslavement of people of colour continued to be watered by 19th century missionary activities. It must be noted that the intentions of individual missionaries were not necessarily complicit with the aims of the government; many had a sincere desire to devote their lives to spreading the love of Jesus Christ across the globe. However, their impact cannot be extracted from that of the wider colonial context of the 19th century missionary movement. The missionaries who went to improve the spiritual and material lives of people in the Caribbean, the Americas, and the global south – and, to an even greater degree, the clergy sent to minister to settler populations in the colonies – were also tools of empire used to facilitate British domination and resource extraction.^[li] Leonardo Boff, writing about Latin America, says, ‘we must confess that the Catholic church has been a companion and an accomplice in the process of domination’ of indigenous populations.^[lii]

5.4.3 A similar confession is warranted in relation to Scottish missionary activities.^[liii] An education in Christianity was also an education in European economic ideals and social norms.^[liii] The assumption that ‘civilising’ was tied to the project of Christianising ran so deep that it formed part of the 1796 General Assembly’s argument against supporting overseas missionary activity: the native inhabitants of Africa and the Americas, they contended, would need to be civilised before they could be evangelised. When the General Assembly decided a quarter century later (in 1824) to begin supporting overseas missions, it was still on the assumption that teaching people the gospel would need to go hand in hand with teaching them to reason in a Western way.^[liv] In practice, this included repressing local culture, redesigning local economies on a Scottish model, and imposing Scottish, middle-class gender roles on indigenous communities, among other things.^[lv] And the stories that missionaries sent back to Scotland of the ‘barbaric’ practices, ‘superstitious’ beliefs, and ‘squalid’ living conditions of people in the global south reinforced racist beliefs that had been popularised in the previous century to ‘justify’ race-based slavery.^[lvii]

5.4.4 By framing missionary work and cultural intervention as a moral and religious duty, the Church normalised attitudes rooted in colonialism, reinforced patronising views of Africa and other non-European peoples, and presented European culture and economic models as inherently superior, embedding a lasting hierarchy of power and value that justified both exploitation and paternalism.

5.4.5 At some point it would be fitting for the Church of Scotland to reflect on its ties to the injustices of 19th and early 20th century British imperialism. For present purposes it is sufficient to note that our actions during this period failed to fix what institutionalised enslavement had broken. This fact may have been inevitable, given the evils of slavery and the fallenness of humanity; but that does not make the suffering of those forced to live with slavery's scars any less. Eventually, we moved on as new social causes became pressing and new evils were perpetrated at home and abroad. Meanwhile, we continued to worship and study in the beautiful buildings that had been erected with the profits of slavery, while the offspring of those who had been kidnapped, 'sold', and forced to work without rights, wages, or respect were still hurting. We stopped suffering with those who were suffering from the legacy of slavery, but we continued enjoying the material benefits that were the legacy of slavery for us.

5.4.6 If, on occasion, we did look back on the Church's connection to trans-Atlantic slavery, we tended to focus on positive aspects of our history, such as the activities of the many church members and presbyteries that campaigned for abolition and emancipation. When we looked at our complicity, we were quick to compare ourselves to others we thought were worse, which helped us feel better about ourselves and our history. Meanwhile, preferences and prejudices that excluded some and favoured others on account of their race, class, or country of origin continued to exist within the Church of Scotland^[viii] and in the UK more widely.^[ix]

5.4.7 The legacy for which the Church seeks to apologise is not confined to the past or to other regions but continues to shape the lives of those who belong to and engage with the Church today.

5.4.8 The legacy of slavery has been experienced differently across regions. Engagement with partners in West Africa and the Caribbean has made clear that, while connected, these legacies are not uniform. In West Africa, the legacy includes the trauma of loss – of people taken, communities disrupted, and agency eroded – followed by centuries of colonial domination that entrenched external control and violence. In the Caribbean, the legacy is woven into the landscape and institutions of everyday life: in place names and archives, in educational narratives that prioritise White abolitionists, in churches and memorials that remember enslavers and missionaries, and in records that catalogue human beings as property.

5.4.9 In Scotland, and across the UK more widely, the legacy of slavery is less visibly embedded in the landscape, yet it remains present through racialised attitudes, social inequalities, and everyday experiences of exclusion.^[x] This is particularly true for people of Afro-Caribbean heritage living in Scotland, whose lives continue to be shaped by colonial histories and persistent racialised assumptions. These realities are reflected both in wider Scottish society and in the lived experiences shared by people of African heritage within the Church of Scotland.

5.4.10 The Ecumenical Pilgrimage to Jamaica in 2024 further reinforced that these legacies are lived rather than abstract. Listening to partners speak about inherited inequality and spiritual harm challenged the Church to recognise that historical distance does not equate to moral distance, and that repentance must attend not only to history but to present relationships and structures. Some of the learning from Jamaica included:

- Extractive plantation systems entrenched financial inequalities, leading to a lack of long-term economic resilience. Colonial policies ensured dependence on European infrastructure and manufactured goods while raw materials were stripped and exported elsewhere, creating deep and enduring global inequalities.
- Racism, hierarchy, and colour prejudice. Systems that ranked enslaved people by skin tone to maximise profit have left lasting cultural legacies. In Jamaica, this is visible in colourism and in patterns of social and economic stratification shaped by skin tone.^[xi] Within the Church of Scotland, people of African descent report experiencing assumptions, patronising behaviour, and unequal treatment rooted in racial stereotypes about competence and belonging.
- Violence and control as shaping forces. Slavery was sustained through extreme violence, the effects of which continue to shape how authority, discipline, and power are experienced. Jamaican partners spoke of the psychological and spiritual afterlives of this violence.
- Distorted narratives of worth and history. In Jamaica and in the UK, national memory often privileges White abolitionists while marginalising the resistance and leadership of enslaved and formerly enslaved people. Within the Church, the histories, theological traditions, and voices of people of African descent are frequently under-represented or treated as supplementary rather than integral.
- Ecclesial relationships marked by imbalance. The Church of Scotland in the Caribbean supported gradual and social reform, and reinforced colonial control by limiting dissent, shaping religious engagement in the Caribbean and between the Church of Scotland and the denominations we partner with there. A theological approach reinforced social hierarchies under the guise of moral guidance: for the enslaved, it encouraged obedience, internalised inferiority, and restricted access to alternative spiritual traditions; for later generations, it perpetuated pernicious stereotypes, cultural marginalisation, and cautious, conservative attitudes toward social change

5.5 The Continuing Legacy in the Life of the Church Today

5.5.1 Engagement with this history and the long shadow it casts has made clear that it continues to shape society and the Church today, including the lived experiences of people of African descent within its congregations and structures today.

5.5.2 Research commissioned by the Church of Scotland into the experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds revealed both welcome and enduring challenges.^[xii] Many participants spoke of care, hospitality, and belonging within local congregations. Others described experiences of exclusion, invisibility, and unequal power that echo longer histories of racial hierarchy.

5.5.3 At a congregational level, this included experiences of superficial welcome without pathways into deeper participation or leadership; being overlooked or marginalised in decision-making; and encountering racialised assumptions or micro-aggressions that communicated a conditional sense of belonging. In some cases, congregants and young people of African descent were discouraged from full participation in worship or community life. These experiences within the Church often sit alongside experiences of racism in wider society adding to a deeper sense of isolation. These experiences are ones that many White church leaders and members may never fully understand without intentional education, humility, and prayerful listening. While such wider social experiences may lie beyond the Church's direct control, we are called to listen, to stand alongside those affected, and to ensure that within our own congregations we offer not a mirror of exclusion, but a genuinely different and more faithful experience of welcome, belonging, and justice.

5.5.4 Although the Church is increasingly diverse, participants described an internal culture that remains overwhelmingly White and shaped by inherited assumptions about belonging and leadership. This contributed to feelings of being welcomed but not fully recognised, included but not always trusted, and present without equal voice or influence.

5.5.5 The Church's own Reports on the experiences of people of African descent within its life make clear that harm is not usually expressed through actions that can be easily proven, attributed, or resolved by identifying individual fault. Rather, what emerges is a consistent pattern of experience: small exclusions, assumptions, silences, and forms of patronisation which, taken together, reveal a pervasive culture that can alienate and diminish. Attending to this reality shifts the Church's focus away from apportioning blame to individuals, congregations, or groups, and towards the more demanding work of examining the attitudes, norms, and theological imaginations that shape common life. This is not work that can be completed through a single policy, training session, or statement, but requires sustained, Church-wide commitment to repair how we understand human dignity, power, belonging, and difference in the light of the Gospel.

5.5.6 A similar humility is required in relation to global inequality. There is no single action the Church can take to undo the structural consequences of colonialism and slavery, yet recognition remains essential. We live in a post-colonial world in which Scotland, as part of a small but powerful island, benefitted disproportionately from systems that severely constrained the life chances of others. The wealth extracted through these systems remains visible around us. Acknowledging this reality invites the Church to act with greater alertness and responsibility: applying a racial justice lens to international partnerships, public witness, political advocacy, and global campaigns, and committing to relationships that seek mutuality rather than unconsciously reproducing inherited imbalances of power.

5.5.7 These realities confirm that this legacy is present in our everyday life. It remains in global relationships, institutional cultures, and lived ecclesial experience, calling the Church to repentance that is relational, sustained, and expressed through changed patterns of power, participation, and care.

6. RECEIVING THE APOLOGY

6.1 This is a public apology for the Church's role in transatlantic slavery. We are not responding to a single act or group of victims but confessing complicity in a system that denied the humanity of African peoples and reinforced racial hierarchies – effects that continue to shape lives, relationships, and the Church itself. Some wrongs are so widespread that they call for public confession, not as a show of piety, but to show those affected – and the wider community – that the Church recognises its failings and is committed to genuine repentance.

6.2 It is proposed that the Apology be addressed broadly to all those of African heritage, including those in Africa, the Caribbean, the UK, and the wider diaspora. In identifying particular partners for deeper engagement following the Apology, however, this Report recommends naming the Church of Scotland's Presbyterian partners in the Caribbean and West Africa, as well as those of African heritage within the Church itself. This is not intended to narrow the scope of the Apology or suggest that harm was confined to specific places, but to recognise living ecclesial relationships shaped by shared history, theological inheritance, and enduring imbalances of power. In the Caribbean especially, Presbyterian life developed alongside – and too often failed to challenge – systems of enslavement and racial hierarchy.

6.3 This Apology is therefore offered in humility and openness, attentive to the African diaspora and mindful of how racialised legacies of slavery continue to shape global relationships. It is made with an awareness that restoration will require ongoing repentance, learning, and a willingness to re-examine inherited patterns of power. The Apology is not offered as an end point, but as one step within a longer journey toward more just, truthful, and mutual relationships.

6.4 Intricately bound with our Apology to those most affected is another key audience: God. Our statement of confession and Apology is not about telling God something God does not already know, rather confessing to God can encourage naked honesty, even with ourselves.

6.5 Our third audience is one another. On the floor of the General Assembly, this mutual confession calls us to step into one another's lives with honesty and vulnerability. As commissioners, we do not speak only for ourselves, but in the presence of the whole Church, bearing witness to one another's grief and sorrow.

7. FRUIT WORTHY OF REPENTANCE

7.0.1 The statement of acknowledgement and Apology presented in this Report is a beginning. As outlined in Section 4, repentance is not measured by words alone, but by the fruit of action that follows.

7.0.2 The challenge is complex. The individuals most directly responsible for the Church's historical involvement in chattel slavery are long dead, and the Church has for generations recognised slavery as a grave moral evil. Yet there remains a deep value in truth-telling, in naming what was overlooked or justified, and in acknowledging how the Church

aligned itself – at times actively, at times through silence – with systems that denied the God-given dignity of others. This work matters not only for those harmed, but for the Church’s own self-understanding and faithfulness today.

7.0.3 An apology of this kind also carries meaning for those who continue to live with the legacies of slavery. To acknowledge harm and to state plainly that people deserved to be treated with dignity and love is to affirm that dignity and worth were denied. Yet such claims are weakened if they remain only symbolic. The credibility of the Apology will depend, in part, on what follows it.

7.0.4 The Legacy of Slavery Task Group heard clearly from some members of African descent that this work touches a deep and painful wound. Their testimony underscored the real and unequal risks involved. For some, reopening this history feels unjustified unless the Church is genuinely prepared for deep and lasting change, particularly where trust in the institution’s willingness or capacity to sustain such work is fragile. When institutions confront histories of racial injustice, it is essential that the Church does not proceed in ways that leave members of African descent isolated, vulnerable, or expected to carry the burden of education, explanation, or defence. Safeguarding those most affected must be integral to whatever follows this Apology.

7.1 What Might Faithful Action Look Like?

7.1.1 While determining specific actions lies beyond the remit of this task group, those most affected by the harms addressed in this Apology have consistently emphasised that words alone are not enough. Through ecumenical consultation, sustained engagement with partners in the Caribbean and wider research, an apology gains meaning only insofar as it helps guide the Church toward faithful action. What follows is therefore offered not as a programme, but as an invitation to discernment – indicating the kinds of questions and practices that may shape repentance over time.

7.1.2 The work of repentance will require time, humility, and sustained commitment. It cannot be achieved through one-off actions or delegated to a single body. It involves confronting distorted theologies, inherited assumptions, and patterns of behaviour that continue to alienate and exclude. Such change must be shared work – undertaken with, not merely for, those most affected by the legacy of slavery.

7.1.3 What follows an apology can either deepen or diminish its meaning. The task group therefore recommends that the General Assembly mandate a working group to support this next stage of discernment answerable to the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team in collaboration with the Assembly Trustees, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group and Theological Form. Its purpose would be to advise the Church on possible expressions of repentance, strengthen global relationships, and help ensure that this work contributes to a more faithful and Christ-shaped Church. Responsibility for this work, however, rests with the whole Church.

7.1.4 Any such working group should be answerable to the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team, with a clear recognition that its work will span three interrelated areas: relationship-building and racial justice, financial implications, and theological reflection. Its remit should be to develop recommendations through open discernment, without presupposing outcomes or allowing any one strand – particularly financial considerations – to dominate or constrain its work. Care should be taken to avoid conflicts of interest, especially arrangements that could limit the group’s freedom to make recommendations, including those with financial implications. If the composition of the group is specified, it should be majority African heritage and supported by an external oversight group able to act as critical friends, drawing on experience in restorative justice and related fields.

7.1.5 Should the General Assembly wish to proceed, careful thought should be given to the composition of any such group. In addition to theological, legal, and financial expertise, it is essential that voices from the Caribbean and African diaspora – including those of this heritage within Scotland – are meaningfully involved. The Church must not assume sole authority to define what repentance requires. The suggestions outlined here draw on the long, faithful, and often costly work of other churches and communities, particularly in Jamaica, whose reflections are shaped by lived experience, pain, and hope for repair.

- Indicative areas for further exploration include:
- rebuilding and reframing relationships with partners in the Caribbean and West Africa, grounded in mutuality rather than inherited power;
- sustained attention to material inequality shaped by slavery’s afterlives;
- deeper theological formation and truth-telling on racialisation, repentance, and the misuse of Scripture;
- careful engagement with financial questions, learning from reparative and restorative models elsewhere;
- local and contextual pilot work, such as the Aberlour project,^[xviii] that connects historical awareness with present commitment.

7.2 Wider international context

7.2.1 The Church’s engagement with its own history sits within a broader international and post-colonial context. Across the Caribbean, Africa, the Americas, and Europe, churches, governments, and civil society organisations are grappling with the legacies of slavery and colonialism in different ways, shaped by local histories and political realities.

7.2.2 There is no single global consensus (including amongst our international church partners) on how these legacies should be addressed. Some contexts emphasise formal apologies, others material repair, institutional reform, or truth-telling and education. What unites these approaches is a shared recognition that slavery was not an isolated historical episode but a system that structured the modern world.

7.2.3 Within this context, the Church of Scotland’s work forms part of a wider ecclesial reckoning. Partner churches in the Caribbean and beyond are engaged in parallel processes of discernment, often from positions shaped by the long-term consequences of enslavement and colonial rule. This shared yet asymmetrical history places a particular responsibility on churches in former colonial powers to listen carefully, to act with humility, and to resist framing reconciliation on their own terms alone.

7.2.4 From the vantage point of the present day, the racialised nature of this legacy requires a wider examination of the Church's global relationships. The work of restoration and repentance to which this Apology points will necessarily include renewed attentiveness to relationships with churches and communities in Africa, with the African diaspora in the UK, and with partners in North America who share in the enduring consequences of this history. These relationships must be reviewed with a desire not only to acknowledge past wrongs, but to learn, be changed, and act differently as a result.

7.2.5 Understanding the legacy of slavery therefore requires holding together local Church history, global inequality, and theological responsibility – recognising that the past continues to press upon the present, and that faithful response demands more than historical acknowledgement alone.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 This Report has traced the Church of Scotland's involvement in transatlantic chattel slavery, not to rehearse guilt for its own sake, but to speak truthfully about who we have been, who we are, and who we are called to become. Slavery was not an accident of history, but a system sustained by greed, theological distortion, and the prioritisation of wealth over human dignity. The Church was not merely a bystander to this reality; it was shaped by it and, at times, benefited from it.

8.2 Scripture does not allow us to treat such truths lightly. As the First Letter to Timothy reminds us: "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil... But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness." (1 Timothy 6:9-11, NRSVA)

8.3 This warning speaks with force to a Church reckoning with a history in which the pursuit of wealth was bound up with the denial of humanity. Repentance, therefore, is not only about naming past wrongs, but about reorienting our life towards righteousness, love, and faithfulness in the present.

8.4 The Apology offered here is one step on that journey. It is not an end point, nor does it seek closure. Its purpose is to open the Church to deeper listening, shared responsibility, and transformation – undertaken alongside those whose lives and communities continue to bear the weight of this legacy. If the Church is to be recognisable as the body of Christ, then this work must shape not only our words, but our relationships, priorities, and practices.

8.5 The calling before us is demanding, but it is not new. It is the call to love our neighbours truthfully, to resist injustice faithfully, and to pursue a Church that reflects more fully the image of God revealed in Christ.

In the name of the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team, the Assembly Trustees and the Theological Forum

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- [i] [Towards a church where all are welcome | The Church of Scotland](#) (accessed 26.02.26)
- [ii] A fuller breakdown of the themes covered can be found in the additional information and background document on the [Church of Scotland Website](#).
- [iii] Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland, *Apologising for Historic Wrongs 2022*, accessed 26/02/2026 available at, https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/93862/apologising-for-historic-wrongs-final-version.pdf
- [iv] John 13:34-35, 17:20-26.
- [v] Leviticus 5:1-5; 1 John 1:8-10; Desmond and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving* (Harper Collins, 2014) 163-192; Annemarie Kidder, 'Confession in the Reformed Tradition,' *Liturgies* 34 (2019) 12-20.
- [vi] See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III Suppl., Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans. (Christian Classics, 1981) Q6; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, F.L. Battles, trans, J. T. McNeill, ed. (Westminster, 1960) 3.4, 622ff.; and Regis Duffy, 'Penance,' *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* vol. 2, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin, eds (Fortress 1991) 231-249.
- [vii] This tradition is given voice in a particularly pointed way in Psalm 51.
- [viii] See 1 John 1:9; Similarly, Calvin writes, 'to confess to God privately is a part of true repentance that cannot be omitted' (*Institutes*, 3.3.18 612).
- [ix] James 5:16.
- [x] The Reformers' objections to confessional practices were about the theological significance attributed to them by some and to the misuse of them by others. Luther continued to commend the practice of private confession to another member of the community of faith and to participate in the practice even after he was excommunicated (Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, G. Bromiley, trans. [Eerdmans 1998] 248). When Calvin wrote to Emperor Charles V in 1544 about 'the necessity of reforming the church,' he acknowledged the usefulness of confiding in one's minister and obtaining consolation and counsel from them (John Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, J.K.S. Reid, trans. and ed. [Westminster Press, 1954] 216). And he thought private confession or something similar should be retained in the Genevan church, even though he did not count it among the sacraments (Kidder, *Confession* 17).
- [xi] Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology* (Harper Collins 1983) 175; Kidder, *Confession*, 16
- [xii] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, RH Fuller and I Booth, trans (Simon and Schuster, 1995) 289.
- [xiii] 'The Westminster Confession of Faith,' chapter XV.6, in *The Book of Confessions of the Church of Scotland* (Saint Andrew Press 2025) 91.
- [xiv] Psalm 51:17; Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.3, 595; Tutu and Tutu, 167.
- [xv] Martin Luther, 'The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,' ATW Steinhäuser, trans, *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 2 (Baker, 1982) 248.
- [xvi] See 'The Westminster Confession of Faith,' XV.2, 91.
- [xvii] Romans 12:15.
- [xviii] Mark 1:14-15, Acts 2:37-42. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.5, 597.
- [xix] Matthew 3:8. Building on this point, Harold O.J. Brown observes, 'true repentance will in some sense be visible' ('Godly Sorrow, Sorrow of the World: Some Christian Thoughts on Repentance,' *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective*, Amitai Etzioni and David Carney, eds [Rowman and Littlefield, 1997] 35).
- [xx] On the importance of repentance in the early Christian community, see Mark Boda and Gordon Smith, eds, *Repentance in Christian Theology* (Liturgical Press, 2006). For a discussion of the actions and attitudes associated with repentance, see Paul Griffiths, *Regret: A Theology* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2021).
- [xxi] Harvey Cox, 'Repentance and Forgiveness: A Christian Perspective,' *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective*, Amitai Etzioni and David Carney, eds (Rowman and Littlefield, 1997) 25.
- [xxii] See Joshua 7.
- [xxiii] Romans 12:5.
- [xxiv] 1 Cor 12:26.
- [xxv] 'The Nicene Creed,' *The Book of Confessions of the Church of Scotland*, p. 22. Similarly, see 'The Apostles' Creed,' p. 17.
- [xxvi] Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland 2022 'Apologising for Historic Wrongs'
- [xxvii] In 2002 the Church of Scotland produced a report examining sectarianism in Scotland and the Church of Scotland's role in perpetuating it and its responsibility to challenge it. On acknowledging the racist and damaging attitudes expressed by the General Assembly and Committees, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, Church and Nation reported; 'From a current perspective, it is a matter of regret that the Committee and the Church could have taken such a position' Church and Nation Committee, 'Sectarianism', Report to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 2002, 12/10.

- [xxviii] The Theological Forum, in its report '*An Approach to the Theology of Same-Sex Marriage*', included a deliverance inviting the church to 'take stock of its history of discrimination at different levels and in different ways against gay people and to apologise individually and corporately and seek to do better' Theological Forum, '*An Approach to the Theology of Same-Sex Marriage*', Report to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 2017 22/2.
- [xxix] Faith Impact Forum passed a deliverance in recognition of the work done by the Theological Forum that year, also referenced in this report, on the role of apologies for historical wrongs: '...acknowledge and regret the terrible harm caused to all those who suffered from accusations and prosecutions under Scotland's historic witchcraft laws, the majority of whom were women, and apologise for the role the Church of Scotland and the General Assembly in such historical persecution. Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 2022, '*Deliverances*' (collated Blue Book section), Faith Impact Forum Deliverance 19 p. 6.
- [xxx] In response to the Scottish Government-commissioned report on 20th-century policies affecting Gypsy/ Traveller communities in Scotland, Rev. Tommy MacNeil and Dr. Mike Cantlay, representing the Church's Faith Action Programme Leadership Team and Social Care Council, issued a statement acknowledging past harms and offering an apology for the Church's historical role in these injustices. This will be presented to the 2026 General Assembly.
- [xxxii] Church of Scotland, '*Report of the General Assembly 2008*', Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 2008, 6.5/8.
- [xxxiii] For example, the University of Edinburgh (New College) and The University of Glasgow, both with strong links to the training of Church of Scotland ministers, have documented their own legacies of profiting institutionally from slavery, whilst the Free Church of Scotland – whose history and legacy is deeply entwined with that of the Church of Scotland directly received donations from slavery supporting congregations in America following the Disruption to support the Free Church by building new churches and manses. Following 1929 Union it is currently unknown how many of these churches (and manses) became part of the Church of Scotland.
- [xxxiv] David Alston, *Slaves and highlanders: Silenced histories of Scotland and the Caribbean* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021) 308ff.
- [xxxv] Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006) 71ff.
- [xxxvi] John MacNaughton, '*The Free Church and American Slavery – Slanders Against the Free Church Met and Answered in a Speech*', Paisley, April 1846. It should be noted that Reverend MacNaughton and his interlocutors disagreed about the moral significance of this fact.
- [xxxvii] Faith Impact Forum of the Church of Scotland, '*Church of Scotland and the Legacies of Slavery*'
- [xxxviii] See Stephen Mullen and Simon Newman, *Slavery, Abolition and the University of Glasgow* (University of Glasgow, 2018); Richard Anderson, *The University of Aberdeen and the Legacies of Slavery* (University of Aberdeen, 2023); Aileen Fyfe et al., *The University of St Andrews and the Legacies of Empire, 1700-1900* (University of St Andrews, 2025); Nicki Frith et al., *Decolonised Transformations: Confronting the University of Edinburgh's History and Legacies of Enslavement and Colonialism* (University of Edinburgh, 2025).
- [xxxix] For example, Angus Mackellar was awarded two separate compensation claims in 1835/6 linked to his wife Helen's (née Stirling) shares in both the Hampton and Kerr Estates, Jamaica, inherited on the death of her father in 1793. The main crops listed through the later 1700s were rum, cattle and sugar. Neither his family connections to slavery nor this additional income seemly prevented the Church from appointing him to the office of Moderator in 1840. Other ministers to receive compensation for interests in the Caribbean include Rev. Stair McQuhae – Minister of St Quivox, and Rev. Peter Robertson – Minister at Callander. Influential Elder John Ross – Chairman of the Calendonian Bank, Inverness owned a coffee plantation in Berbice and c.175 enslaved people. See Faith Impact Forum of the Church of Scotland, *Church of Scotland and the Legacies of Slavery*; See Alston, *Slaves and Highlanders*, 227.
- [xl] Thomas Chalmers, *A Few Thoughts on the Abolition of Colonial Slavery* (Chalmers & Collins, 1826) Thomas Chalmers was, arguably, the most influential Scottish church leader of his generation.
- [xli] Chalmers, *A Few Thoughts*, 7-9.
- [xlii] For a discussion of the development of Biblical defences of race-based slavery, see Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (Verso 1997) ch. 1; and Michael Taylor, 'British Proslavery Arguments and the Bible', 1823-1833, *Slavery and Abolition* 37 (2016) 139-158. Taylor cites Henry Duncan, a Church of Scotland minister, making the latter argument.
- [xliii] See, for example, an extract from the Memoirs of Philip Thicknesse published in *The Scots Magazine* 50 (October 1788) 747. Similar views remained in popular circulation more than 40 years later and were rehearsed for a wider audience in the novel *Marly, or a Planter's Life in Jamaica* (1828). The novel was published anonymously, but its publication is associated with the Glasgow West India Association, which was a pro-slavery lobby group.
- [xliv] Whyte, *Scotland* 79.
- [xlv] Whyte, *Scotland* 80.
- [xlvi] Rev. John Witherspoon, for example, believed passionately in the importance of Christian instruction for enslaved people and promoted their evangelisation, yet failed to recognise the theological contradiction involved in proclaiming the gospel while upholding a social order that denied freedom and full humanity.

Witherspoon later went on to enslave people in the United States Witherspoon's complex relationship with slavery, including his own enslavement of Black Africans has been examined as part of Princeton University's "Princeton and Slavery" project, documenting the institutions ties with Black slavery – see Lesa Redmond, 'John Witherspoon' *Princeton & Slavery Project*, accessed 05/02/2026 available at: slavery.princeton.edu/stories/john-witherspoon

- [xlvi] The evidence given by prolific Scottish enslaver William Shand to the *Select Committee on the Extinction of Slavery* (1832) also supports a view of the Church of Scotland's as part of the establishment and suggests that, at least in Jamaica, the Presbyterian and Established Church were not considered to be mutually exclusive, and one could easily attend the others' Church or appoint either's clergy to minister on one another's estates. It appears though this did not extend to other denominations on the Island, who might give, in Shand's words, the "impression that faith is sufficient without good works, which I consider extremely pernicious to impress on the negro mind". Shand's attitude, as influential member of society and member of the Jamaican House of Assembly, demonstrates further that the Church of Scotland and the Established Church, in Jamaica, represented one 'safe' moral bloc for the plantocracy, whilst other denominations were considered dangerous.
- [xlvii] "We do not know how benevolence to our labourers, or patriotism to the community, can be better shown, than by contributing to raise Kirks in the different Parishes of the Island. The Scotch Clergy will have the confidence of the proprietors and managers; they will be the friends and guides of the poor, a companion for the higher ranks, and a comforter for the lower. They are too well informed to push forward improvement by great and rapid strides; they know that men acquire new habits by imperceptible degrees; and that any sudden change may just be as reasonably expected, as it would be to expect, that a child put to bed at night should rise in the morning a full grown man!" Excerpt from *The Jamaica Royal Gazette, 13 October 1832* "Another Scotch Kirk."
- [xlvi] This quote from the memoirs of Rev Waddell of the Scottish Missionary Society demonstrates the divisions amongst missionaries and 'sectarian' / non-conforming denominations and the Church of Scotland in Jamaica, as well as the role of the Colonial Churches Union. "The Unionists tried to draw the Scottish missionaries into their schemes. Owing, perhaps, to the number of Scotchmen in the colony, and the fact that our Missionary Society was in part connected with the Church of Scotland, they exempted us from the term Sectarian, and professed a design to erect Scotch kirks in all the parishes, as a new branch of the island Church Establishment. But we disapproved both of their objects and their offers. We had no desire to separate from the great missionary cause; nor to be allied with the only representative of the Church of Scotland (Rev James Wordie of the Kingston Kirk) in the country, or with the Established Church of the colony. Then the blandishments became curses, and pretended friends real enemies. We were denounced as Scotch Sectarians, worthy only of being treated like all the others" excerpt from, Rev Hope Masterton Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa: a Review of the Missionary Work and Adventure, 1829-1858* (Scottish Missionary Society 1863)
- [xlix] *Knight vs Wedderburn 1778*
- [l] John McAleer, "'The Sharer of My Joys and Sorrows': Alison Blyth, Missionary Labours, and Female Perspectives on Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Jamaica', *Empires of Religion*, H.M. Carey, ed. (Palgrave Macmillan 2008) 199-221.
- [li] Hilary Carey, *God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c. 1801-1908* (Cambridge 2011) 206-243; Laurie Guy, 'Missionary and Maori, 1840-1865', *Shaping Godzone: Public Issues and Church Voices in New Zealand 1840-2000* (Victoria University Press 2011) 33-60.
- [lii] Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, John Drury, trans. (Orbis 1984) 73.
- [liii] '[T]he very origin of the term "mission" ... presupposes the ambience of the West's colonization of overseas territories and its subjugation of their inhabitants. Therefore, since the sixteenth century, if one said, "mission", on in a sense also said "colonialism"' (David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* [Orbis 1991] 302-303).
- [liv] John MacKenzie, "'Making Black Scotsmen and Scotswomen?'" Scottish Missionaries and the Eastern Cape Colony in the Nineteenth Century,' *Empires of Religion*, H.M. Carey, ed. (Palgrave Macmillan 2008) 113-136.
- [lv] Esther Breitenbach, 'Religious Literature and Discourses of Empire: The Scottish Presbyterian Foreign Mission Movement,' *Empires of Religion* 93.
- [lvi] See MacKenzie and Breitenbach for examples.
- [lvii] Breitenbach, *passim*.
- [lviii] The Church of Scotland, *Towards a church where all are welcome*, accessed 05.02.2026, available at <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/departments/faith-action-programme-committees-and-departments/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-group/towards-a-church-where-all-are-welcome>
- [lix] See Mike Cole, "'Race" and Racism in the UK: Through History and Today,' *Education, Equality, and Human Rights*, Mike Cole, ed. (Routledge 2023) pp. 44-82.
- [lx] Around a quarter of people from ethnic minority backgrounds reporting experiences of racism in the past five years. Rates are particularly high among people of Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean heritage – see Nissa Finney, Nigel De Noronha, BEMIS, *Racism, belonging and COVID's legacy of ethnic inequalities in Scotland: A report of the Evidence for Equality National Survey*. (Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity 2024).

- [lxi] Colourism refers to prejudice or discrimination based on skin tone, privileging lighter skin over darker skin within the same racial or ethnic group. It can manifest in social and economic disadvantage, including pressure to lighten and bleach one’s own or a child’s skin in the belief that this will improve access to employment and opportunity. This is a widespread issue in the Caribbean with parents bleaching the skin of children as young as five.
- [lxii] The research referenced here uses the terms “Black and Minority Ethnic” in line with Office for National Statistics (ONS) guidance at the time alongside census categories, which group those who do not identify as White British for analytical purposes. The Church of Scotland, [*Towards a church where all are welcome*](#)
- [lxiii] The Aberlour project took place between May and September 2025 as a collaboration with the University of Highlands and Islands where schools and congregations explored local connections to slavery through education and art, demonstrating how historical awareness can shape present-day commitment and imagination.