

## Third Sunday after Epiphany – Year A

### Third Sunday after Epiphany – 22 January 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Churches Together in Britain and Ireland for their Order of Service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship. It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings.

This week's material allows us to join with other Christians around the world for a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity as we are guided by the churches of Minneapolis in exploring how the work of Christian unity can contribute to the promotion of racial justice across all levels of society. You are invited to use the liturgy to celebrate in your Sunday gathering or in an ecumenical service of worship, and to make use of the daily reflections, prayers and discussion points throughout the week, which can be found on the [CTBI website](#).

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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## Be-Longing: Praying for Unity Amidst Injustice

### Welcome

The murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis in May 2020 was described as a watershed moment. There was a sense that the global wave of solidarity that brought people out onto the streets during a pandemic would make it impossible to ignore the deadly consequences of institutional racism and the power imbalances that deny human dignity.

The Black Lives Matter movement has certainly sparked uncomfortable yet necessary conversations, shaking the complacency that allowed racism and xenophobia to slip down the agendas of political and civic leaders alike. It has also questioned their reliance on legislation to protect people's rights and challenged the failure to invest in the deeper work of examining the quality of our relationships in society, the attitudes that shape them and the language that defines them.

Yet with each passing year we see continued evidence that, across the world, the powerful institutions of the state continue to treat people differently based on race, ethnicity and other facets of identity that are protected in legislation. Those who live in fear are still waiting for their watershed moment.

Despite the heightened awareness of the nature and consequences of racism in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement there is a persistent resistance to dialogue about issues of power and privilege, exclusion and alienation in society. Christians bring to this dialogue a vision of reconciliation grounded in mercy and faithfulness, justice and peace, from which we draw hope for the healing of relationships.

For this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we are guided by the churches of Minneapolis as we seek to explore how the work of Christian unity can contribute to the promotion of racial justice across all levels of society. Through this resource, the CTBI writers' group has also focussed our attention on the 30th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, which we mark this year. The work of restoring hope through justice undertaken in Stephen's memory continues to inspire and change lives for the better.

As we join with other Christians around the world for this year's Week of Prayer we pray that our hearts will be open to see and hear the many ways in which racism continues to destroy lives, and to discern the steps we can take as individuals and communities to heal the hurts and build a better future for everyone.

*Dr Nicola Brady, General Secretary, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland*

## Introduction to the theme

### Do good; seek justice (Isaiah 1:17)

On 22 April 1993 a teenager was murdered on the streets of London while waiting for a bus. Stephen Lawrence was a promising young man looking forward to fulfilling his dream of becoming an architect. He was murdered simply because he was black. The murder was to have a seismic effect on society and its reverberations were felt across the four nations of Britain and Ireland. It revealed the ugliness of racism, and this was compounded by the systemic failures of the police to bring Stephen's murderers to justice. Following a public inquiry, the Macpherson Report of 1999 brought to wider attention the concept of "Institutional Racism", the racism that is deeply embedded in society or in institutions.

This year we mark the 30th Anniversary of Stephen Lawrence's murder and this will be a major focus for many who work for a society that is free from racism. As long as racism exists, we live in a divided society and a divided world, so during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we reflect upon how these divisions impact our shared life as we pray together for the unity for which Christ prayed. But we also acknowledge how much churches have contributed to division and prejudice within our institutions and also society. As long as there is racism there will be no Christian unity!

This year's resources are inspired by the experience of our Christian sisters and brothers in another part of the world who are wrestling with this very issue. They have reflected on how we pray for Christian unity when Christians are part of unjust and racist structures. For the churches of the US State of Minnesota, the murder of George Floyd and the institutional racism it embodied provide the focus for their prayer for unity and justice. They place before us the prophet Isaiah's challenge to do good and seek justice (Isaiah 1:17). The prophet is writing to the people of Judah at a time when formal religion is thriving, in a culture which understands wealth as blessing from God and poverty as punishment. Seeking justice and doing good is not on the agenda of either the priests in the Temple or the ruling authorities in the neighbouring palace.

Isaiah seeks to awaken the conscience of the people to the reality of their situation. Instead of honouring their religious expression as a blessing, he sees it as a sacrilege. Isaiah denounces the political, social and religious structures which encourage the hypocrisy of offering sacrifices whilst oppressing the poor. He speaks out vigorously against corrupt leaders and in favour of the disadvantaged. Isaiah teaches that God requires righteousness and justice from all people, all the time, in all spheres of life.

Our world today mirrors the challenges that Isaiah confronted. Justice, righteousness and unity originate from God's profound love for each of us. They are at the heart of who God is and how God expects us to be with one another. Yet injustice and oppression continue. The sin of racism is evident in practices that set one racial group over and against another. When accompanied or sustained by imbalances of power, racial prejudice moves beyond the individual to take up residence in the structures of society.

Like the religious people so fiercely denounced by the biblical prophets, some Christian believers are complicit in supporting and perpetuating prejudice and oppression, thereby fostering division. Christians involve themselves in structures of sin that strip others of their dignity; structures that enable and promote slavery, colonisation, segregation, apartheid. Sometimes within the Church, we fail to welcome racial difference; when we fail to recognise the dignity of any, we trample on the dignity of all.

The prophet Isaiah calls us to learn to do good and requires us to decide to engage with the issues. We are challenged to engage in self-reflection. Praying together during this week allows us to reflect on what unites us and enables us to commit ourselves to confront all instances of oppression and injustice. Undertaking this commitment requires churches to acknowledge their own complicity in racial injustice. We must confess how our silence has allowed other voices to sound out without challenge. As Christians we must be willing to disrupt systems of oppression and advocate for justice. Our commitment to each other requires us to engage in restorative justice (*mishpat*). We must speak out, dismantle unjust structures and create a society in which people can live with freedom and dignity. We must engage in dialogue and so increase awareness and insight about the lived experience of all people. Together, we must engage in the struggle for justice in society – because we all belong to Christ.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, through the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, stands in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in the United States by reflecting upon racism in our own context.

## Order of Service

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Parts of the service assigned to a Reader may be shared among several different readers. Similarly, texts assigned to the Leader may be shared among clergy or leaders from the different traditions and communions participating in the worship. These leaders may pronounce the Sending together.

### The Gathering

Leader God is here  
Congregation **The Spirit is with us**

Leader How great is this place,  
for it is the touching-place of God.

In Christ, we are gathered from the edges  
and woven into the dream.

Here we feel the hint of heaven,  
where justice, love and mercy meet.

Here we celebrate  
the blessedness of unity in God.

We, who were once far off,  
are brought near.

And so we pray,  
God, creator of all,  
in your love, you have made each one of us  
in your grace, you gather us together in your image  
in your mercy, you make us restless until we find our rest in you.  
Disturb us in our contentment,  
distract us from our comforts  
deter us from our conflicts  
until your kingdom comes and your will is done

Congregation **Amen**

### A Hymn of Praise

### **Invitation to Confession and Forgiveness**

We gather to pray for the unity that is Christ's gift to the Church. We gather in hope that the world might believe and be reconciled to God.

We recognise that we are part of churches and communities that are divided by injustice, especially the sin of racism, which stands contrary to the image of God shining from every human face.

*"And what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?" (Micah 6:8)*

And so we come in penitence and faith to confess...

*(Silence)*

Leader                      Forgive us Lord, when we come to worship without walking humbly  
before you

**Congregation            May we be forgiven**

Leader                      We ask forgiveness for the complicity of churches in the evils of  
colonialism

**Congregation            May we be forgiven**

Leader                      We ask forgiveness for our sins of injustice and oppression

**Congregation            May we be forgiven**

Leader                      We have been called to unity. Forgive us anew and reconcile us to one  
another.

May God's mercy free us from our sins, to do justice,  
love kindness and walk humbly with our God

**Congregation            Amen! Thanks be to God!**

### **Prayer**

God of all,  
because of your great love  
our sins have been washed away  
and we are part of the beloved community.

We come before you, a holy family,  
a rainbow people,  
united in the beautiful diversity of your creation.  
We celebrate the rich tapestry of the human family.  
We commit ourselves to overcome prejudice and disunity wherever we find it  
and to walk humbly in your presence.

**Amen**

## **Ministry of the Word**

### **Micah 6:6-8**

### **Psalm 85:5-12**

Leader                      Righteousness and peace have kissed  
**Congregation            Righteousness and peace have kissed**

Reader                      Bring us back, O God, our saviour!  
Put an end to your grievance against us.  
<sup>6</sup> Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will your anger last from age to age?

<sup>7</sup> Will you not restore again our life,  
that your people may rejoice in you?  
<sup>8</sup> Let us see, O LORD, your mercy,  
and grant us your salvation.

Reader                      <sup>9</sup> I will hear what the LORD God speaks;  
he speaks of peace for his people and his faithful,  
and those who turn their hearts to him.  
<sup>10</sup> His salvation is near for those who fear him,  
and his glory will dwell in our land.

Reader                      <sup>11</sup> Merciful love and faithfulness have met;  
justice and peace have kissed.  
<sup>12</sup> Faithfulness shall spring from the earth,  
and justice look down from heaven.

### **Luke 10:25-37**



## Hymn

### A Homily or Sermon may be offered

*(Moment of silence or hymn)*

### Stones and Stories

At this point everyone is invited to listen to two or more stories or testimonies from people who have challenged racism in their personal or professional life. Videos or sound files can be downloaded from the CTBI website at <https://ctbi.org.uk/weekofprayer>. If you are using these, you may wish to suggest that people listen either with their eyes closed or focused on a crucifix or cross, or some other focal point. If it is appropriate, local testimony can be offered instead. After each story/testimony it is recommended that silence is kept.

Leader: When you came into the church you were given a stone. Hold that stone now as we listen to stories of injustice.

*[We listen to a story of how someone has experienced racism and sought to challenge it]*

Leader: As we hold our stones, heavy with pain and suffering and injustice, we remember.

Thirty years ago a British teenager waiting for a bus was murdered. We remember Stephen Lawrence. We remember and honour his parents, who fought tirelessly for justice. We bow our heads in shame that society has moved on so little in thirty years.

*[We listen to a story of how someone has witnessed racism and sought to challenge it]*

We stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in Minnesota. We remember George Floyd, slowly suffocated to death in an appalling example of racism and abuse of power. We give thanks for the outrage and anger which resounded throughout the world and which loudly proclaimed, "Black Lives Matter!"

We honour all those people who are and have been victims of racism and xenophobia. We fall silent, acknowledging that their names are not known, their stories not heard, justice not delivered.

*(Silence)*

We pray that their suffering may bring forth the fruit of transformation and justice. Finally, we remember and honour those we know who are victims of prejudice, injustice, abuse, bullying, or violence of any kind. We ask Christ crucified to bless them, give them strength, lead them to freedom. We ask forgiveness of anything we may have done, or omitted to do, to contribute to their suffering or collude with their abuse.

Leader: We invite you now to bring your stones, heavy with pain and suffering, remorse and repentance to the cross.

*As the congregation moves forward to place their stones at the foot of the cross, we listen to 'Lift Every Voice', an African American Jubilee Spiritual which was written by James Weldon Johnson (1900). It is often referred to as the Black national anthem in the United States. The song is a prayer of thanksgiving for faithfulness and freedom for the enslaved, voicing a cry for liberation and affirmation for African American people.*

<https://www.jamesweldonjohnson.org/lift-every-voice-and-sing>

## **Lord's Prayer**

### **Concluding Prayer**

God for all,  
we place before you  
our willing complicity in the evil of racism,  
our ready complacency in the face of injustice,  
the hardness of our hearts and the heaviness of our souls.  
Judge us, not for these things,  
but for the manner in which we act  
to transform the world  
into the place of your Kingdom.  
Amen

## **Concluding Hymn**

### **The Sending: A Franciscan Benediction**

*Attributed to the earliest followers of St Francis*

May God bless you with discomfort  
at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,  
so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger  
at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,  
so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears  
to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,  
so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them  
and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness  
to believe that you can make a difference in the world,  
so that you can do what others claim cannot be done  
to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.  
Amen

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**Psalms 85** from the Revised Grail Psalms, copyright United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Used with permission.

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## Downloads

Downloadable versions, including Welsh, Irish and Scots Gaelic translations, and all-age resources, from <https://ctbi.org.uk/week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity-2023/>

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity wall: [www.weekofprayer.org](http://www.weekofprayer.org)

## Twitter

#wpcu2023 #wpcuwall

## Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

- CH4 187 – “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy”
- CH4 198 – “Let us build a house where love can dwell”
- CH4 253 – “Inspired by love and anger”
- CH4 254 – “O God, we bear the imprint of your face”
- CH4 359 – “He came down that we may have love”
- CH4 362 – “Heaven shall not wait”
- CH4 685 – “For everyone born, a place at the table”
- CH4 769 – “Santo, Santo, Santo”
- Ancient and Modern 450 – “Jesus calls us here to meet him”
- Ancient and Modern 535 – “Creating God we bring our song of praise\*”
- Ancient and Modern 569 – “The kingdom of God is justice and joy”
- “Act Justly, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly” – Pat Barrett  
<https://www.worshiptogether.com/songs/act-justly-love-mercy-walk-humbly-pat-barrett/>
- A suggested [playlist of songs for the Season of Epiphany](#) can be found online
- You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

## Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?  
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/  
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?  
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?

Did it function well as a whole?

How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?

- How balanced was the worship?  
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?  
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/  
community?  
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?  
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

## Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and  
download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)