

Two churches are better than one



The United Nations in Geneva

The United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ are working together to tackle anti-Black racism

IT ALL STARTED WITH A QUESTION. Could we do something better together?

The United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ (USA) entered into a full communion agreement in 2015. Since then, the two denominations have been exploring aspects of common mission. Now they have identified the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent as something they can work on.

“In embarking on the journey of full communion, the two churches identified that there are justice issues that we can engage together,” explains Karen Georgia Thompson, Minister for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations with the United Church of Christ.

According to The United Church of Canada’s John Young, “One of the benefits to the full communion agreement we have with the United Church of Christ is the opportunity to share resources and to learn from one another.”

Young is the Executive Minister, Theological Leadership and the lead staff from The United Church of Canada with the Full Communion Implementation Group. “Work around this UN decade was identified by the implementation group

for the full communion agreement as one area in which the two denominations could work together,” Young notes.

Both denominations are justice-seeking churches with long histories of faithful public witness and advocacy. Both share a desire to challenge racial injustices. The decade “is an opportunity to bring awareness and change to the ongoing challenges and inequities in our communities,” says Thompson.

WHAT IS THE DECADE?

The United Nations has named 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent. In proclaiming this decade, the international community is recognizing that people of African descent represent a distinct group whose human rights must be promoted and protected.

Maggie McLeod, the United Church’s Executive Minister, Aboriginal Ministries and Indigenous Justice, is part of a joint working group from both churches on the decade. McLeod notes that “the theme for the decade calls for recognition, justice, and development for peoples of African descent. The act of recognition is the first step toward creating processes of healing societal wounds that have been inflicted from an absence of acknowledging basic human rights.”

In October 2016, a UN Working Group of Experts on People



Adele Halliday, Team Leader for Discipleship & Wellness for The United Church of Canada, with Alydia Smith, Program Coordinator for Worship, Music, and Spirituality, at the United Nations in Geneva.

of African Descent visited Canada and wrote a comprehensive report about anti-Black racism in Canada. The group made dozens of related recommendations. Its report linked Canada's history of enslavement, racial segregation, and marginalization to many of the current conditions faced by Black people in Canada. Across the country, Black people have disproportionately higher rates of poverty, poorer health, and lower educational attainment, and they are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

The recognition of historical racial injustices and racial privilege—and the legacy of the enslavement of Black peoples—will be important for the two churches to address as part of the UN decade. Thompson explains that the decade offers an opportunity for churches to address their complicity around the transatlantic slave trade and racism in the lives of churches in light of their contemporary justice learnings.

For example, according to the World Council of Churches (WCC), in the late 1800s in many colonies around the world, although Black peoples were being emancipated from legal slavery, they were not given land and had to pay high rent for tools and other resources. At the same time, White European immigrants were given incentives such as land and other resources. Thus, people of White European ancestry who had no direct involvement in slavery or the slave trade nevertheless became beneficiaries of the enslavement system. This legacy is still producing profound inequities today.

The United Nation's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination notes that racism and structural discrimination against people of African descent are evident in a number of areas: their being, together with Indigenous peoples, among the poorest of the poor; their low rates of

participation and representation in political and institutional decision-making processes; and the difficulties they face in access to and completion and quality of education, which results in poverty being transmitted from generation to generation. Other problems include inequality in access to the labour market, limited social recognition and valuation of their ethnic and cultural diversity, and their disproportionate presence in prison populations.

The realities faced by Black people within Canada and the United States parallel these global inequities. The report of the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent directly links the contemporary experiences of Black people in Canada to enslavement and its legacy. This history of anti-Black racism in Canada includes specific laws and practices of segregation. Even though racial segregation is no longer a legal practice, the report writes about “anti-Black racism and racial stereotypes that are so deeply entrenched in institutions, policies and practices.” In Canada, because racism is institutional and systemic, it is often normalized or rendered invisible to people of the dominant racial group. White people, in particular, may be quick to deny the existence of racial injustice in a seemingly tolerant and multicultural Canada.

Paul Douglas Walfall, former president of Alberta and Northwest Conference and current ministry personnel at Fort Saskatchewan Pastoral Charge, names the Canadian context clearly: “In Canada we must come to terms with the reality that the enslavement of African peoples occurred in this country,” he says. “The United Church of Canada must come to terms with the fact that groups such as the KKK have existed with the support of some in the church. Racism

THE TERM “BLACK”

There is a diversity of naming within the Black community globally. The United Nations uses the term “people of African descent,” and this includes people of African ancestry, descent, or heritage who self-identify as Black. For clarity, this article uses the term “Black” because it can be a more expansive term to refer to people of this racial identity.

against racialized people is still a reality in this country. The decade reminds us that we have much work still to do to ensure that the image of God is celebrated and honoured in all human beings.”

LOCAL EFFORTS

Anthony Bailey is ministry personnel at Parkdale United Church in Ottawa, and he and his congregation are one example of how local clergy and churches are offering leadership to mark the UN decade. In February 2015 Parkdale United emphasized the decade in one of its worship services. “We marked the beginning of the decade with an extemporaneous prayer for our congregation and world to privilege the experiences, contributions, and struggles of people of African descent in our prayers, work, and advocacy,” he explains.

In 2017, Bailey was invited to be the keynote speaker for the launch of the Ottawa Black History Month event at the National Library and Archives. The same year he also presented at the Historical Society of Ottawa. At both events, he spoke about the importance of the UN decade. In speaking at the Historical Society of Ottawa, he noted that “the experience, role, and contributions of people of African descent to the project of Canada have only recently begun to gain non-tokenized recognition and celebration.” He also spoke of the contributions of people of African descent to Canadian and world history.

Other ministers, such as Walfall, have used the resource *Sankofa: The Histories and Heritages of Black Peoples in The United Church of Canada* in their congregations. This DVD and study guide introduce diverse histories and heritages of Black peoples in the United Church, feature little-known facts about the United Church, and help viewers discover connections between faith, identity, and culture.

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

The WCC has also committed itself to this work. Semegnish Asfaw, Programme Executive with the WCC’s Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), explains that “the CCIA’s advocacy work at the UN also includes working with the UN Decade for People of African Descent. We are liaising with several UN human rights mechanisms in Geneva and have recently organized an International Hearing on Racism and Afrophobia.”

The international hearing included representatives from The United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ, who offered leadership throughout the event. Thompson preached at the morning worship service. Her sermon—inspired by Amos 5:18–24—challenged the church

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to be present in the midst of the rushing waters of justice as an active participant giving voice to the need for change, rather than being quiet and on the sidelines.

The hearing was scheduled around the 36th session of the UN Human Rights Council last September. I was also at the international hearing and was able to do some advocacy with the United Nations. When

the Human Rights Council received the report from the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent about their trip to Canada, I was one of the people who responded. I offered ideas about strengthening the report and suggested additional recommendations.

THE DECADE’S IMPORTANCE

Peter Haresnape is the General Secretary of the Student Christian Movement in Canada and part of the joint working group on the decade. “The UN decade is a way to experience the rich histories of people of African descent,” he says. “Our churches need this time to hear, consider, and grow into the knowledge, to address contemporary anti-Black racism and injustice.”

It is important to note that the UN decade is not about a competition or putting Black people above all others. Walfall says it is not an attempt to assign any notions of superiority for people of African descent. “It is more a means for the whole church to acknowledge, celebrate, and support the work of peoples of African descent,” he says. “It is also an opportunity for us to continue the work of making our church a truly intercultural community.”

Haresnape speaks about his commitment to the decade as a White person and reflects that he still has more to learn. “This decade is not only for people of African descent,” he says. “It is a time for all God’s people to lift up the achievements of a section of the community, for in so doing, we are, in fact, lifting up the entire community.”

McLeod stresses the importance of the task ahead. “We’ve learned from the 1986 apology to First Nations peoples that it takes all of us to do this work; and that it will take a very long time for attitudes and systems to transform.” 

Other resources will be available to help United Churches honour the UN International Decade for People of African Descent. In the meantime, explore the website un.org/en/events/africandescentdecade and consider ways of engaging throughout the year, not just during Black History Month in February.

Adele Halliday is the United Church’s Team Leader for Discipleship and Witness.