

## Racial Justice Lessons Learned at UBE Conference

A few deputies from England, led by Revd Guy Hewitt, Director, Racial Justice Unit, Church of England and Rt Rev Smitha Prasadam, Bishop of Huddersfield attended the UBE (Union of Black Episcopalians) conference in Montgomery, Alabama, USA from the 24<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> July 2023. It was a thought-provoking conference; it provided a deeply moving experience and motivated the participants to perform the mission of racial justice with renewed vigour and determination.



The delegates from the Church of England at the UBE conference

The conference began with a warm welcome by Rt Rev Dr Glenda Curry, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama. She acknowledged the presence of God in Christ at the conference and assured that 30,000 Episcopalians were solidly behind the conference. The Very Revd Kim Coleman, President of UBE set the tone for the conference with a firm statement of what the UBE stands for. Kim reminded us about the scourge of racism, the need to continue to fight it boldly and our responsibility to advance the cause of racial justice.



The Very Revd Kim Coleman

Dr Catherine Meeks, Founding Executive Director of the Absalom Jones Episcopal Centre for Racial Healing was the keynote speaker on 24<sup>th</sup> July. Catherine began by stating that she was not in a happy place as she started her talk. In her opening remarks she said, “I had cried myself to sleep the night before simply from the weariness of living in this broken world, the announcement of the Florida School Board deciding to teach their students that ‘slavery was a good and advantageous thing for many enslaved persons because they learned a skill’ and life in general had simply brought me to a broken-hearted space.” It was courageous of her to be candid about her vulnerability and to affirm humanity and her state of grief and exhaustion at the beginning of the speech.

She acknowledged UBE’s commitment to vigilance and action aimed at achieving justice for all people and especially for people of colour, to the eradication of racism in the Church and society, and to the full and dynamic inclusion of minority ethnic people in every aspect of Church life. Her impetus to fight for racial justice comes from the legacy of the ancestors who gave themselves to work for freedom from slavery. The ancestors lived with the hope that freedom might come tomorrow. They believed that truth might come someday to set them free.

Her challenge to the audience was concise, clear and definitive. She said, “The Ancestors are looking back at us, and they want to know. What are we doing about the legacy that they

gave us? How are we working to overcome the illnesses of colourism and other racialized trauma, the Racial prejudice that makes it seem alright to keep killing one another, the lack of compassion for our prisoners and other poor people.” Her using the word ‘prisoners’ was touching as many black children and adults end up in prison after false allegations and unjust rulings of courts. Her words were powerful and struck a chord with the audience.

The talk ended with these words. “I want to invite you to explore your inner community. ... James Baldwin says that we have to name what needs to be healed even though we cannot heal everything, we will only heal what we name ... Please take a look at my new book *The Night is Long, But Light Comes in the Morning* to learn more about this inner exploration and work. Let the Ancestors know that the Legacy is in good hands because you will work to be a half shade braver everyday as we build on their great gifts.”

She was kind to answer questions which the audience had with learnings from experience, wisdom and clarity. Her unswerving commitment to fight for racial justice was evident in (and underpinned) all that she said. The way she sees it, the work of emancipation belongs to all; it has to be performed and shared by all. In her words, “If I die doing what I’m supposed to do it then so be it. I must do what I’m supposed to do.” We had a break to pause and reflect on the talk and its import.



Dr Catherine Meeks



Rev Guy Hewitt with the UBE President and Secretary

Following the break Rev Guy Hewitt, the director of Racial Justice Unit of the Church of England conveyed the Archbishop of Canterbury’s greetings to all at the UBE conference. He said that the delegation from England was there to learn from the long history and experience of the UBE in their relentless fight against racism. Indeed, the perseverance and determination of members of UBE in standing against the evil of racism is remarkable and inspiring. Rev Hewitt claimed that they found a vaccine for Covid but a vaccine for

the virus of racism is yet to be found. He also said that they are not alone in their fight for racial justice. Demonstrations after the death of George Floyd happened not only in the USA but all across the globe including England. We are all one in Christ.

In the evening, the UBE conference members worshipped at St John’s Episcopal Church, Montgomery, Alabama. The service was led by Rt Rev Diane J Bruce, Rt Rev Glenda Curry and Rt Rev Smitha Prasad. The Rev Dr Mauricio Wilson, Rector of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in

Oakland, California preached a sermon on the theme of identity and freedom. He cited examples from the scripture of people finding their identity and freedom in and through God. He challenged the congregation to know that God made them good and to be the people whom God wants them to be. The music was joyous and uplifting featuring the rich musical tradition and culture of people of colour.

On 25th July Tuesday morning the conference got going with a panel discussion. The panellists spoke on the myths that the Beloved Community is dying, incarceration redeems, mental health is not an issue for black youth and to protect and serve applies to black people. While white people end up in prison, they know that they did commit the crime. However, many black people end up in prison for offences they did not commit. It was noted that in John 18 even Jesus was arrested but it was a sham arrest by a kangaroo court. He was slapped for no apparent reason. Police using excessive force is found even in the New Testament. The tragic part is that innocent persons are presumed to be guilty and punished on the ground of race.



President Kim with the Panellists

Further it was pointed out that the percentage of mental illness is significantly higher among people of colour. It was also noted that when people of colour receive therapy, it is very different to go to a white therapist from a black therapist. The white therapist says, "It is in your head, you have to get over it." The black therapist says, "I get you." There is nothing to match lived experience. Conversations on racism must continue.

Following the panel discussion, three workshops were organised for the conference attendees. Workshop 1 focused on preparing participants for the different museums they would be visiting. The importance of this became evident when we visited them the next day.

Workshop 2 was a talk with slide show on liberating black congregations from the trauma of racism and re-visioning ministry to black communities. The speaker was clear in her message. "The research is available; the data are clear – racial discrimination and structural racism take a toll on the brain. When the church itself is the stressor, when the church contributes to the mental, spiritual and physical disease, where do we turn to? The need for the church to fight against racism to be authentic was apparent and clear in her message.

Workshop 3 was to help participants learn about strategizing for political effectiveness and impact. This workshop examined what UBE members can do on the local, diocesan and state

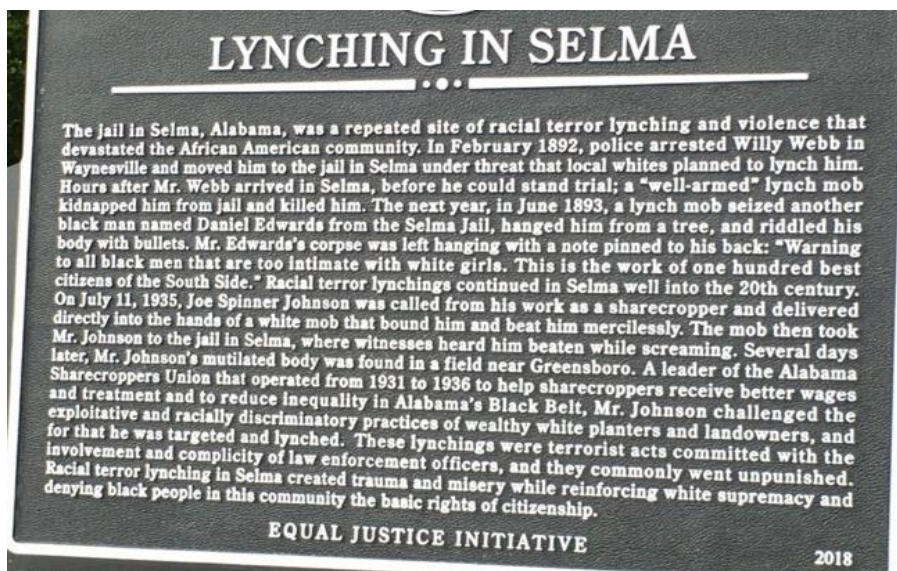
levels to impact policy and decision-making processes. They were all well organised to empower members of the UBE.

On the same evening we visited Selma. It was moving, an experience of a lifetime, to stand in the same place where Martin Luther King stood and led marches for civil rights. The first march took place on March 7, 1965, led by figures including Bevel and Amelia Boynton, but was ended by state troopers and county posse-men, who charged on about 600 unarmed protesters with



batons and tear gas after they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in the direction of Montgomery. The event became known as Bloody Sunday. Law enforcement beat Boynton unconscious, and the media publicized worldwide a picture of her lying wounded on the bridge. The second march took place two days later but King cut it short as a federal court issued a temporary injunction against further marches. That night, a White group murdered civil rights activist James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister from Boston. The third march, which started on March 21, was escorted by the Alabama National Guard under federal control, the FBI and federal marshals (segregationist Governor George Wallace refused to protect the protesters). Thousands of marchers averaged 10 miles (16 km) a day along the U.S. Route 80, reaching Montgomery on March 24. The following day, 25,000 people staged

a demonstration on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol.



We were also privileged to go to the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Selma. We learned that in olden days only white people could enter the church through the front door. Black people were allowed to come through the back door but they had to sit only

at the side nave of the church. Things have changed today but there is a very long way to go before distinctions fade away completely.

During dinner we had a speech from Julia Ayala Harris, the president of the House of Deputies, the presiding officer who works alongside the presiding bishop. President Julia is the first

Latina and woman of colour to hold this position. She said that people often mistake her at conferences thinking that she works as a waitress doing hospitality. Her talk was powerful and poignant. She spoke with authenticity of the lived experience of racism.

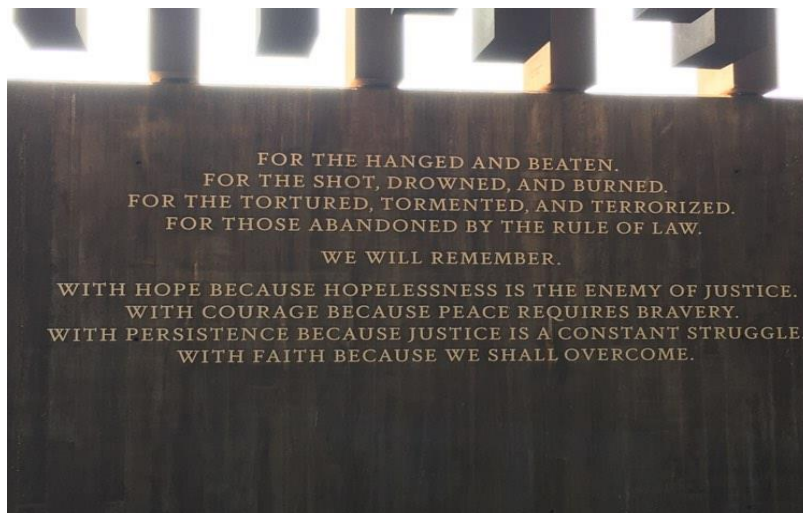
Her talk was succinct and to the point when she spoke on the need for truth telling, transparency and accountability. She challenged the church by asking, "How our parishes acquired wealth and land?" meaning how much money came to the church through slavery and slave market. She asked us to follow Miriam just as the Israelites did. Miriam's story serves as an example of how we should never lose faith in God's plan for our lives, and how we should give thanks to Him at all times. The day ended with compline prayer.



Julia Ayala Harris, the president of the House of Deputies

We had the visits to museums from which we gained an understanding of stark and graphic realities of colonialism, slavery and racism the next day. Our first stop was at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, informally known as the National Lynching Memorial. This museum focuses on and acknowledges past racial terrorism and symbolizes an advocacy of social justice in America. Founded by the non-profit Equal Justice Initiative, it opened in downtown Montgomery, Alabama on April 26, 2018.

It consists of a memorial square with 805 hanging steel rectangles representing each of the counties in the USA where a documented lynching took place. It brings a choke to your throat when you walk there. You inevitably ask how we human beings can be so bad when we have the potential to be good and why our actions do not reflect the essential goodness of human nature.



The next stop was at the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. This memorial complex features artwork by Hank Willis Thomas, Glenn Ligon, Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, Titus Kaphar, and Sanford Biggers. The exhibits in the 11,000-square-foot museum include oral history, archival materials, and interactive technology.

The purpose of this museum is to lead the visitor on the path from slavery to racial oppression in other forms, including terror lynching and mass incarceration of minorities. To illustrate the point of ongoing oppression, the exhibits include photographs of African-Americans picking cotton; the photos could be easily mistaken as depicting the slavery period. In fact, they are of inmates from 1960s. In one telling exhibit, a panicked group of captured and chained Africans stand opposite a group of men, arms raised, at the moment of arrest.

The museum employs digital technology to dramatize the horror and terror of enslavement, lynchings, and legalized racial segregation in America. Visitors can hear, see, and be in close proximity to slave replicas, which model what it was like to be an imprisoned slave awaiting sale at the auction block. There are first person accounts of slavery and auctioning through narration and voice overs. We were lost for words – all we could do was to grieve together. It was heart-wrenching to learn that families were split and children and adults were auctioned separately. We left with a heavy heart and tears in eyes. No one will be the same after visiting the Legacy Museum. We resolved to make greater strivings for human equality and dignity.



The conference concluded with a worship service at the Church of the Ascension, Montgomery. Bishop Smitha led the worship service which had so much of youth and



Bishop Smitha with delegates from the Church of England and the UBE Leadership Team at the Church of the Ascension, Montgomery

children’s involvement. She thanked the UBE for their warm welcome and openness in sharing their story. It was wonderful to hear her telling us that her father had participated in civil rights marches in Montgomery.

The delegates from the Church of England came back recommitting themselves before God to share this story of racism with others and work for racial justice in England. The UBE has a long history of 55 years from which we learned a lot. Their determination, perseverance and resilience in the face of life-and-death-struggles is empowering. In comparison with what UBE has achieved we have a very long way to go in England. And, we should tread the path drawing strength from the true inwardness of Christ’s teachings and endeavour to do our best for the emergence of a world free from racism holding God’s hands. The good news is, as Archbishop Tutu would put it, we are on the winning side. Racial Justice will win eternally for according to the Book of Revelation, people of all nations and tribes will be living together – with no more tears - for eternity. It is sensible to join the winning side – the side of racial equity. To work for racial justice is to make a glimpse of that vision in the book of Revelation to become a reality in England and in God’s global world today.

*The Revd Dr Godfrey Kesari is the Vicar of the Holy Innocents’, Southwater, in Sussex, the Racial Justice Officer for the diocese of Chichester and the interim secretary of AMEN.*