



THE RACIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY FORUM

The Racial Justice Advocacy Forum Launch

Bloomsbury Baptist Church, London

15 February 2023

7.00pm

'Churches Advocate for Racial Justice'

www.rjaf.org.uk

Programme

- Welcome and Prayers *Simon Woodman*
- Birth of RJAF *Eleasah Louis and Amie Buhari*
- The story so far *Eleasah Louis and Amie Buhari*
- ‘Black Theology’ *Performance by HEBE and
Interpretation by Robert
Beckford*
- The Church:
Speaking Truth to Power *Les Isaac*

Current RJAF projects

- RJAF Manifesto *Richard Reddie*
- Criminal Justice System *Bevan Powell*
- Reparations *Rhaea Russell-Cartwright*
- Poem *Antoinette Brooks*
- Worship *Sarah-Jane Nii-Adjei, Joshua
Hudson-Roberts and Tabatha
Crook*

Be Thou My Vision

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;
Be thou my best thought in the day and the night,
Both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
Be thou ever with me, and I with thee Lord;
Be thou my redeemer, my love thou has won;
Be thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
Be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;
Be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great power of my power.

Riches I need not, nor earth's empty praise:
Be thou mine inheritance now and always;
Be thou and thou only the first in my heart:
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
Great heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be thou my vision, O ruler of all.

Racial Justice Advocacy Forum – rationale for engagement

The Racial Justice Advocacy Forum (RJAF) is an ecumenical Christian entity that seeks to speak prophetically on behalf of Black and Brown Christians to the UK Government on racial injustice challenges and reparations. The forum comprises representatives from various Christian institutions such as the Ascension Trust, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, the Evangelical Alliance, the Methodist Church, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), The Salvation Army, the Sam Sharpe Project, and the United Reformed Church.

It can be argued that the RJAF is part of a rich, but often overlooked, heritage of Black British Christian activism and advocacy on issues impacting Black communities in this country.

Context

This activist-related history dates back to an epoch when Black people first began settling in Britain, but one can identify the 18th century as a time when there was a real upsurge in this activity. It is no coincidence that the 18th century also witnessed the zenith of Britain's involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and many of the Black Christians living on these shores (at that time) were naturally drawn to the growing slavery abolition movement. (Any 'free' Black person in Britain was at risk of being kidnapped and forced back into slavery in the Americas.) These believers, who were often baptised at St Margaret's Church in Westminster, London, were inspired by a conviction that all people were made in the image of a God of justice who called on his people to act justly. Consequently, figures such as Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoana, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw et al fought alongside their White Christian counterparts in the Black freedom struggle. (It is interesting and ironic that the aforementioned White abolitionists tend to be well remembered and venerated – William Wilberforce is buried in Westminster Abbey and his Clapham Sect colleagues have streets and schools named after them in Clapham, south London. Their Black Christian equivalents were allowed to fade into obscurity.) Equally, there were Black Christian women such as Mary Prince who alongside another Black female, Phyllis Wheatley, wrote about slavery and her experiences. Mary Prince, who was a Moravian, said: 'I have been a slave myself—I know what slaves feel—I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me. The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery—that they don't want to be free—that man is either ignorant or a lying person. I never heard a slave say so. I never heard a Buckra (white) man say so, till I heard tell of it in England.' Finally, the Sons of Africa were a now

overlooked group of freed Christian Africans who were active in the abolition movement in late 18th century.

The racism that took root during African chattel enslavement, outlasted its diabolical bedfellow, and has manifested itself in many ways in Britain (and elsewhere) ever since. However, Black Christians in this country have stood against it- sometimes in concert with White allies. A good case in point was Dr Harold Moody, a Jamaican-born Christian who was a member of the Congregational Church. Dr Moody arrived in the UK in 1904 to study medicine. After qualifying as a doctor, he was denied opportunities to become a surgeon in hospitals due to racism and was forced to set up a general practice in Camberwell, south London. Dr Moody went on to establish the 'League of Coloured People' in 1931 which fought against racism in Britain – it was built on Dr Moody's Christian humanitarian principles and was arguably the first recognised civil rights organisation in the UK. Dr Moody is often described as Britain's answer to Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr; akin to Dr King, his organisation was established on Christian principles and campaigned for Black rights, which Dr Moody did until his death in the late 1940s.

History shows that Black Christians in west London responded to the 'Teddy Boy'-related racism in Notting Hill and North Kensington in the 1950s that led to racial disturbances, and the racist killing of Antiguan-born carpenter, Kelso Cochrane in May 1959. Cochrane's White killers were never caught, and his death highlighted the murderous nature of British racism.

The activism that was sparked by the Cochrane murder was continued by figures such as (Bishop) Wilfred Wood, who went onto to establish one of the first supplementary schools in Britain to address the failure of the British education system to properly teach Black students in primary and secondary schools. He was later joined by the Methodists, Revds Hughie Andrew and Robinson Millwood, who, alongside tackling racism, saw education as a primary means of Black advancement in racist Britain.

The historical churches in Britain began to take greater interest in racism (in society) in the 1970s (they turned their attention to 'getting their own houses in order') a decade later. Again, Black Christians were part of British Council of Churches (BCC) Church and Community Relations Unit that was established in the early 1970s.

History shows that there were several levers or access points that facilitated Black Christian engagement in racial justice-related activism. There was the obvious racism that existed in Britain in areas linked to public policy functions such as housing, health (including mental health), the criminal justice system (and crude police racism), employment and education among others. Equally there was the overt,

vulgar racism in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and the vile Apartheid system in South Africa that saw an international dimension to this struggle.

The racist killing of Stephen Lawrence in April 1993 proved to be Britain's 'George Floyd' moment and saw a flurry of activity and engagement by Black Christians, if not by their churches. As the Lawrence family were Methodists, Black Methodists were some of the first Christians to get behind the subsequent fight for justice to find Stephen's killers. Equally, figures such as Revd Ron Nathan and Dr R. David Muir, who were linked to African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance, were keen to not only encourage their Black Christian brothers and sisters to be part of this campaign, but to take a greater interest in fighting racism per se. Dr Muir went on to establish the Black Christian Civic Forum to champion Black faith engagement in the public square, and later the NCLF.

Since that time a new generation of well-known Black British Christian activists, male and female, have come to the fore and have been encouraging the church to be more courageous in its work to tackle inequality. There is little doubt that the RJAF seeks to stand on the shoulders of these giants; heroic Black Christians whose faith, courage and vision must be celebrated. These women and men, many of whom feature in the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland publication *Racial Justice Champions Volume 1*, have made Britain a better place to live and work.

Why now?

There is little doubt that the police-related killing of George Floyd in May 2020 proved to be a catalyst or 'Kairos moment', and driver for action. The sheer brutality of that killing exposed the fallacy in the USA (and in the UK) of 'post-racial' societies. It exposed the fact that Black Lives, as a result of a history of slavery, colonialism and naked racism, did not matter to enough people, especially those in positions of power. What we witnessed in the heady days of the killing's aftermath were social media inspired protests being organised by young people, some of whom were connected to the church. There was an energy and urgency to these demonstrations and a sense that young people with a natural sense of justice did not want to see their lives blighted by the racism that marred their parents and grandparents' existences.

The RJAF has a similar urgency and desire to see change in our lifetime, and this is also inspired by the same beliefs held by those Black Christians centuries ago that we are all made in the image of a God of justice who calls on us to act justly, and be peacemakers and reconcilers. These ideas are firmly rooted in the Christian scriptures and have little to do with so-called 'new-fangled' ideas (not that they should be unduly criticised) such as Critical Race Theory or post-Marxist thinking. The RJAF wants to be part of a prophetic Black British Christian tradition that addresses sinful behaviour in the form of racism wherever it rears its ugly head.

Despite having a South Indian Prime Minister, and the findings of the spurious 'Sewell Report', Britain still remains a deeply racist country in so many ways, with Black and Brown people being at the sharp end of it. This has been witnessed by the disproportionality of the impact of the pandemic, the Grenfell Tower Fire, and the Windrush Scandal. They will also be adversely affected by the cost-of-living crisis that will see all aspects of our lives getting harder. Black people are also impacted by their negative interactions with the police, and the ongoing lack of confidence and trust with the forces of law and order. Black students are also still being failed by the education, and in recent days we have heard about institutional racism (and misogyny) in the London Fire Brigade.

These issues will never go away unless properly addressed at a societal level. The RJAF wants to inspire, encourage and empower Black and Brown Christians, especially the younger ones, in British and Irish churches to be changemakers who are committed to seeing "justice flow like a river and righteousness like a never-ending stream" in our society. The RJAF wants to be that prophetic voice which gives churches greater confidence to not only speak about, but also act on issues that are uncomfortable but important to address, in both church and society. The RJAF's launch on 15 February 2023 will be an occasion for it to unveil that vision and implore Christians to get behind it.

The RJAF was birthed in the British and Irish churches – it belongs to the church and wants to be an offering to the churches. Thus far, it has certainly benefitted from the largesse of the Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of Great Britain and The Salvation Army UK and Ireland Territory. Equally, parachurch groups such as Churches Together in Britain and Ireland have been firm supporters. However, for it to really gain traction, it needs to engage with all of its potential core constituency - church denominations in Britain and Ireland with Black and Brown believers.

Thanks and Acknowledgements

The RJAF is grateful to the Methodist and United Reformed Churches for their sponsorship of the launch, The Salvation Army for producing and designing the programme, the caterers - Bickles Caribbean Food and Bloomsbury Baptist church for providing their wonderful church for this occasion.

The RJAF is also grateful to its many community champions: The Revd Dr Joel Edwards, Bishop Dr Joe Aldred, Marcia Dixon MBE, Bishop Rose Hudson-Wilkins, Pat White, Lady Doreen Lawrence OBE, Bishop Mike Royal, Bishop Dr Esme Beswick, Revd Wale Hudson-Roberts, the Revd Les Isaac OBE, Professor Robert Beckford, Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed, Richard Reddie, Professor Anthony Reddie, Bishop Rosemarie Mallet, Dr Leroy Logan, the Rt Hon David Lammy MP, Dionne Gravesande, Jennifer Crook, Pastor Alton Bell, the Revd Dr Kate Coleman, Dr David Muir and Dr Pauline Muir who through their advocacy have paved the way for organisations such as Ascension Trust, the Movement for Reconciliation, National Church Leaders' Forum and the Racial Justice Advocacy Forum to find a prophetic voice.



For more information about the RJAF and its work and campaigns please visit the website:

www.rjaf.org.uk