

Slavery, Abolition & Evangelicals



The Abolition of the Slave Trade bicentenary 1807-2007

Uniting to change society

Slavery & Abolition: A Chronology of Key Events

- 1442 Captain Antão Gonçalves brings back to Portugal ten Africans and gold dust obtained directly from Africa from Christians.
- 1492 Columbus 'discovers' the New World, opening the way for trade, European expansion, the decimation of the indigenous population and their replacement by African slaves.
- 1562 First sailing expedition by Sir John Hawkins.
- 1619 First record of Africans landing in Virginia.
- 1625 First English settlement on Barbados.
- 1631 Charles I granted monopoly on Guinea trade to a group of London Merchants.
- 1655 British capture of Jamaica as part of Oliver Cromwell's 'Grand Design'.
- 1672 Royal African Company granted charter to carry Africans to the Americas.
- 1713 Under the Treaty of Utrecht Britain is granted a thirty years' right (the Asiento) to supply the Spanish colonies with 144,000 slaves.
- 1772 The Somerset case held that no slave could be forcibly removed from Britain, leading to the view that slavery was illegal in England, Wales and Ireland.
- 1778 Slavery declared illegal in Scotland.
- 1783 The Zong case: Captain Luke Collingwood of the slave ship Zong throws 133 slaves overboard for insurance purposes in 1781
- 1783 The establishing of the Committee on the Slave Trade by the Quakers' Meeting for Suffering.
- 1787 Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade founded with Granville Sharp as its president.
- 1789 The publication of Olaudah Equiano's The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano Or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written By Himself.
- 1791 Slave revolt in St Domingue (Haiti) led by Toussaint L'Ouverture.
- 1804 Haitian Independence from the French.
- 1805 Bill for Abolition passed in the Commons, rejected in the House of Lords
- 1807 25 March, Slave Trade Abolition Bill passed.
- 1822 Denmark Vesey's revolt in Virginia.
- 1831 / 32 'Baptist War'; slave revolt in Jamaica.
- 1833 Slavery Abolition Bill passed which abolished slavery throughout the British Empire, effective from 1834 with the provision of an 'apprenticeship' period of six years. Planters paid £20,000,000 compensation.
- 1838 1 August, enslaved men, women and children finally became free.

Slavery, Abolition & Evangelicals

Commemoration of the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, 1807

Dr. R. David Muir: Evangelical Alliance Public Policy Director

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." (Galatians 5:1)

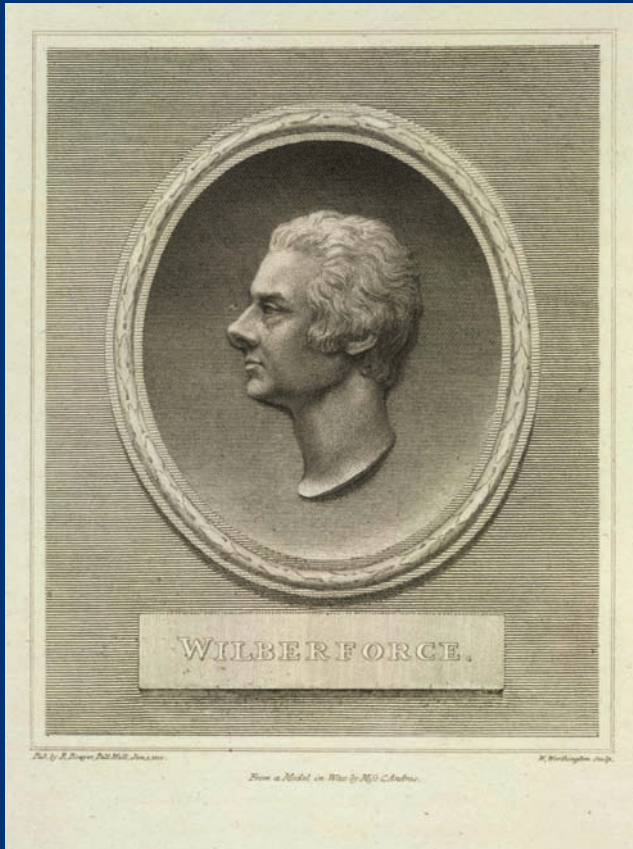
Introduction

25 March 2007 marks the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. As one of the defining moments in modern British history, the bicentenary provides an opportunity to remember, reflect and ask the right questions about the legacy of slavery, the deeds and struggles of brave men, women, and the masses of ordinary people who fought against an organised and immoral system of brutality and death. It also reawakens our corporate and public memory. The memory of a less 'enlightened' period in British history when the political economy operated independently of morality, creating a dominant ideology that aided the transatlantic slave trade and its consequent depopulation and underdevelopment of the African continent. As difficult as the corporate and public memory of slavery is, we need to extract from its narratives lessons for today, for 'slavery' is still with us; millions of people are caught up in human trafficking, bonded labour, and exploited as sex slaves.

Evangelicals played a significant role in the abolition of the slave trade, as well as in the abolition of slavery itself. Because of their religious beliefs and values they were amongst the leading philanthropists and pioneered numerous welfare provisions and social reforms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There is a line of spiritual continuity and practical piety, of evangelical witness and concern for social and spiritual transformation. The bicentenary is also a timely reminder of this rich legacy, as well as a renewed challenge for Christians today to actively "promote justice and compassion for the poor, vulnerable and oppressed"¹.

In commemorating the bicentenary, this booklet aims to do three things briefly. Firstly, draw attention to some biblical perspectives on slavery and society; secondly, make a couple of observations about the nature of slavery and the contributions of some key abolitionists; and thirdly, offer some suggested activities for churches and groups to mark the bicentenary.

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1 See *Faith & Nation: Report of a Commission of Inquiry to the Evangelical Alliance* (2006), Recommendation 35.



William Wilberforce

"God Almighty has placed before me two great Objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners."
(28 October, 1787)

The Bible, Slavery and Society

Slavery as a socio-economic institution was not a European invention. Indeed, slavery, servitude and exploitation have been part of the human condition² from time immemorial. The practice of enslaving one's fellow creature existed before the birth of Christ and before the formation of the nation states of Europe. Slavery existed in ancient Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, India and China. Greek and Roman societies flourished and developed as a result of slave labour. Aristotle justified slavery on the grounds of nature and expediency, 'reason and fact'. He argued: 'For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.'³ In St Augustine, we get neither the argument from nature nor the argument from expediency for the existence of slavery. Rather, what we are presented with is the view that slavery is a punishment for sin ('the deserts of sin'). However, Augustine is persuaded that if nature (i.e., 'the condition in which God created man') is to be invoked, the biblical perspective tends toward freedom, for in this 'order of nature' no man 'is the slave either of man or of sin'.⁴ Whether one adopts the Aristotelian or the Augustinian viewpoint, a number of rationalisations and justifications have been used for slavery in both ancient and modern times. Interestingly enough, there will always be those who would argue the pro-slavery case by reference to what can be called the *developmental* argument.

In respect of the development and achievements of ancient Greek civilisation, this argument would sound something like this: although slavery was a moral evil, 'it was not too great a price to pay for the supreme cultural achievement ... of the Greeks'.⁵ For modern slavery and Africa it can be summarised thus: 'European instigation of the transatlantic slave trade was undoubtedly *a moral evil*, but it was *economically good* for Africa'.⁶

Of course, the ubiquitous ancient institution of slavery and its relationship to the growth and development of Christianity portrayed differences in both degree and kind in the treatment of slaves. As a socio-economic institution, slavery was present in ancient Israel and early Christianity. In both the Old and the New Testaments we encounter different forms of slavery, along with biblical injunctions about its regulation, status and limits (Exodus 21:1-11; Leviticus 25:39-59; Deuteronomy 15:12-18). In the Exodus narrative, and the event of 'redemption' from bondage, we witness two central ideas in relation to slavery and oppression: firstly, that God is not indifferent to suffering and injustice; and secondly, that there is a moral imperative that mercy and kindness be shown toward slaves based upon God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

2 See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, New York, Cornell University, Press:1966; see also his *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press:2006, pp. 27-47; M.I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, Middlesex, Penguin Books:1983.

3 See Aristotle's Politics, Bk I: Chapter 5, in Richard McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, New York, The Modern Library:2001. In the previous chapter Aristotle defines the master-slave relation, as well as the nature and office of the slave: 'Hence we see what is the office and nature of a slave; he who is by nature not his own but another's man, is by nature a slave; and he may be said to be another's man who, being a human being, is also a possession.'

4 Augustine, *The City of God*, Middlesex, Penguin Books:1972 (translated by Henry Bettenson and introduced by David Knowles), Book XIX, Chapter 15.

5 M.I. Finley, op. cit., p.14.

6 See Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, London, Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications:1972, p.110.

Concerning the freeing of enslaved Israelites after six years' service we read:

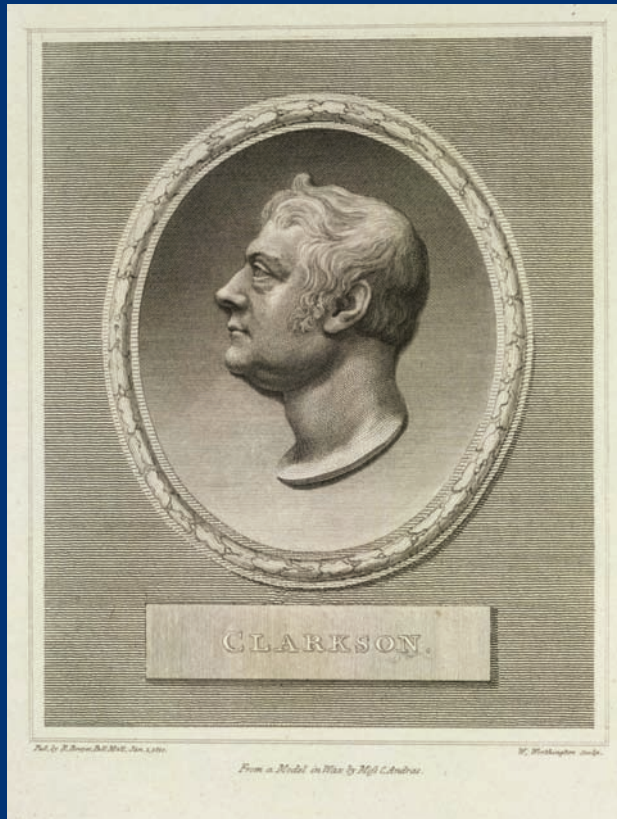
"And when you send him away free from you, you should not let him go away empty-handed; you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what the Lord has blessed you with you should give him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord God redeemed you; therefore I command you this thing today." (Deuteronomy 15:13-15).

Although Old Testament injunctions and New Testament aspirations - exemplified in the moral imperative of the second commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39) - suggest an evolutionary development culminating in the abolition of the spiritual distinction between 'slave' and 'free' (Galatians 3:28) we see in the Gospels and in the writings of St Paul evidence of a society in which the institution of slavery is *normative*. For example, there are slaves present in the centurion's household (Luke 7:1-10); narratives of master-slave relationships (Luke 12:37-46); admonition on the proper conduct and interpersonal relationships between 'bondservants' knowing that both of them have a Master in heaven 'and there is no partiality with Him' (Ephesians 6:9); and finally, there is Paul's letter to Philemon concerning his runaway slave Onesimus, who became a convert under Paul's ministry. In his letter, Paul is encouraging Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother 'both in flesh and in the Lord', even 'as you would welcome me' (Philemon 16-17). This exhortation to Philemon, the slave master, marks an important development in early Christian teaching, arising out of the moral imperative of the 'second commandment'.

However, one wonders (like so many big 'ifs' of history) how different religious and secular thought would have been articulated in respect of slavery had St Paul simply argued that now Onesimus had become a Christian, slavery was incompatible with his new found status. Would the pages of history be filled with the decimation of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, or with the death of millions of Africans and the depopulation of the continent? To put it more poignantly: what would have happened if Paul had declared that Christianity was totally incompatible with slavery and, in consequence, Philemon's position as a Christian becomes untenable (suspect) in keeping Onesimus in perpetual bondage?

Of course, this would have turned the ancient world 'upside down'⁷, foreclosing and arresting the desolation, death, and negative influence of 'New World' slavery before its tentacles were spread. Such a radical departure in Christian theology had to wait for nearly a millennium and a quarter after Augustine to find one of its most powerful and poetic expressions in the abolitionist campaign slogan— 'Am I Not A Man and A Brother?'

7 This was said of followers of Jesus after St Paul spent weeks reasoning 'from the Scriptures' at a synagogue in Thessalonica: 'But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too."' (Acts 17:6)



Thomas Clarkson

In his major tract, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786), Thomas Clarkson restored to the African those personal and social qualities slavery and misrepresentation had destroyed.

'New World' Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation

In November 2006, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair wrote an article on slavery which appeared on the front page of *The New Nation* newspaper. In it he acknowledged the horror, the scale and the duration of the transatlantic slave trade; he also expressed 'deep sorrow'⁸ that it ever happened and outlined how the Government was responding to the current challenges of aid, trade and debt in the African Diaspora. Like the activities and planned programmes supported by and coordinated through many of the agencies and individuals on the Government's Bicentenary (Abolition) Advisory Group, the Prime Minister's article has provided much food for thought and opportunities for reflection. Doubtless, many of the conundrums, controversies, and contributions of key individuals and institutions will be focused upon during this bicentenary year of activities.

Topics for dialogue and debate will include the following:

- the role of the Church and Christianity in slavery and abolition;
- the contentious 'capitalism and slavery' thesis;
- the role played by Black people in the abolition of the slave trade and emancipation;
- Wilberforce, evangelicals and Walden Media's "*Amazing Grace*" film on this most famous of the abolitionists;
- the legacy of slavery in contemporary society, modern day slavery;
- demands for a formal 'apology' from the Government and the claims of the 'reparations' movement, etc.

Conundrums, Controversies & Contributions

One of the conundrums of modern slavery intimated by the Prime Minister, and wrestled with by historians, is poignantly stated by Walvin: 'Quite why the Africans were recruited in such numbers *as slaves* has become a major historical conundrum.'⁹ Was it to do with 'race', or was it fundamentally about 'labour' and the cheapness of African labour at the height of British overseas and industrial development in the eighteenth century? Historians like Eric Williams opt for the latter explanation. In his classic, *Capitalism & Slavery*, he states: 'Here, then, is the origin of Negro slavery. The reason was economic, not racial; it had to do not with the colour of the labourer, but the cheapness of the labour. As compared with Indian or white labour, Negro slavery was eminently superior.'¹⁰

8 The Prime Minister's article was, undoubtedly, well received in many quarters. However, there were those who felt that Tony Blair should have, like the Church of England, used the opportunity to offer an 'apology' for the role Britain played in the Transatlantic Slave Trade in commemorating the bicentenary.

9 James Walvin, *Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing:2001 (second edition; first published in 1992), p.viii. Another 'major conundrum' for Walvin is 'why did the British turn against their slave empire at the very point at which it seems to have been yielding such largesse to Britain?'

10 Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, London, André Deutsch:1964 p.19.

Although the development of the plantation in the British colonies in the West Indies, and the ideology of the plantocracy, brought in its wake theories to justify and rationalise African slavery (racism—a 'racial twist'), Williams maintains that slavery 'was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery.'¹¹

A transatlantic trade that lasted for nearly 400 years, saw over 30 million people violently removed from the African continent, provided the capital to finance¹² the Industrial Revolution in England and other parts of Europe and America, was more than just an 'economic phenomenon'. It was an institution supported by the state, financiers, and a powerful lobby of planters and politicians. There was also an 'intelligentsia' armed with specious and irrational philosophies (ideology) on 'race' in the age of reason and 'enlightenment'.

Religion played a critical role in ending the slave trade and slavery. It also, paradoxically, played a role in its delay. This can be seen in the attitudes of the Church of England at the time and the Nonconformist missionary societies in the Caribbean. With its power, wealth and influence the Church of England, argues Gratus, could have been an 'invaluable force on the side of abolition and emancipation had it chosen that course'. However, its commitment to the 'sanctity of property' and its alignment with the West Indian merchants and the plantocracy acted as 'a brake on progress'.¹³ The Church of England owned plantations in Barbados with 300 slaves bequeathed to it by the wealthy slave owner, Christopher Codrington.

Nonconformist thinking, whether expressed by John Wesley or James Mursell Phillippo of the Baptist Missionary Society, sided with the slaves against the powerful plantation owners. In his *'Thoughts Upon Slavery'* (1774) Wesley stated:

'I absolutely deny all slave holding to be consistent with any degree of even natural justice... Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature. Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary choice.'

In line with Wesley's sentiments on the incompatibility of Christianity with slavery, it's important to remember that at the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846, American slave owners were barred from membership of the Alliance.

11 *ibid.* p.7.

12 *ibid.* pp. 98-125. E.J. Hobsbawm makes the point that if a visitor had gone to Liverpool in 1750 he 'would doubtless have been impressed with the bustle of that fast-rising port, based, like Bristol and Glasgow, largely on the trade in slaves and colonial products - sugar, tea, tobacco, and increasingly cotton'. See his *Industry & Empire*, Middlesex, Penguin Books:1969,p24

13 See Jack Gratus, *The Great White Lie, Slavery, Emancipation, and Changing Racial Attitudes*, London & New York, The Monthly Press Review:1973, pp.144-145.

One of the most moving antislavery speeches was delivered in 1833 at Spa Fields Chapel, London, by William Knibb at the annual meeting of the Baptist Missionary Society. Knibb had first-hand experience of the brutality and dehumanisation of slavery as a Baptist missionary in Jamaica. In his speech he invoked the judgment of God and the responsibility of Christians to banish 'the evil of slavery' from the earth:

God is the avenger of the oppressed, and the African shall not always be forgotten. I plead on behalf of the widows and orphans of those whose blood has been shed. I plead that the constancy of the Negro may be rewarded. I plead on behalf of my brethren in Jamaica, whose hopes are fixed on this meeting. I plead on behalf of their wives and their little ones. I call upon children by the cries of the infant slave, whom I saw flogged at Macclesfield Estate in Westmoreland. I call upon mothers, by the tender sympathy of their nature. I call upon parents by the blood-stained back of Catherine Williams, who, with a heroism which England has seldom known, preferred a dungeon to the surrender of her honour... If I fail in arousing your sympathies I will retire from this meeting, and call upon Him who hath made one blood all nations upon the face of the earth. And if I die without beholding the emancipation of my brethren and sisters in Christ, then, if prayer is permitted in heaven, I will fall at the feet of the Eternal, crying: Lord, open the eyes of Christians in England to see the evil of slavery and to banish it from the earth.¹⁴

14 John Brown Myers, The Centenary Volume of the Baptist Missionary Society: 1792-1892, London, The Baptist Missionary Society:1892, (see *"The West Indies"* by Rev Jonathan East) pp.192-193.



Olaudah Equiano

'Middle Passage' survivor who saw himself as
'a particular favourite of heaven'.

Oludah Equiano: Testimony of a 'Middle Passage' Survivor

Oludah Equiano is an important figure in abolition history. According to Peter Fryer, he was the 'first political leader of Britain's black community'.¹⁵ Kidnapped at the age of 11, he survived the 'Middle Passage' and arrived in Barbados. He was later shipped to Virginia where he was bought by a British naval lieutenant called Michael Pascal, who renamed him Gustavus Vassa. Equiano later bought his freedom in 1766 for £40; he also went on to write a 'bestseller' in 1789 about his experience and his coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

Below is an extract from his autobiography describing the period after he was kidnapped and the 'Middle Passage':

Thus...at the end of six or seven months after I had been kidnapped, I arrived at the sea coast. The first object which saluted my eyes... was the sea, and the slave-ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe, nor the then feelings of my mind. When I was carried on board I was immediately handled, and tossed up, to see if I were sound...such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if then ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. When I looked around the ship too, and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted my fate, and quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted...I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country...I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat...I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me...but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands...and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely...I would have jumped over the side, but I could not...I have seen some of these poor Africans prisoners most severely cut for attempting to do so (i.e., leap into the water), and hourly whipped for not eating...The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us...In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries... One day, when we had a smooth sea, and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together...preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made it through the nettings, and jumped into the sea (and) drowned. At last we came in sight of the island of Barbadoes, at which the whites on board gave a great shout, and made many signs of joy to us.

Oludah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oludah Equiano. Or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written By Himself* (originally published in 1789), edited and introduced by Vincent Carretta, London, Penguin Books:1995, pp.54-60.

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15 See his *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, London, Pluto Press:1984, p.102.

Learning from the past, remembering for the future?

Those who opposed the slave trade and slavery in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were remarkable. They were going against the grain of society, prophetically challenging the political economy, morality, sensibilities and consciousness of their age. There were many in the 'Lord's army', as it were, who courageously fought 'that most inhuman traffic' – the slave trade and slavery.

Although William Wilberforce, the eloquent parliamentarian, is duly recognised as the prince of the abolitionist movement—'the very sun of the Claphamic system'¹⁶, according to Sir James Stephens—there were countless others who made significant contributions. Individuals like Thomas Clarkson, Henry Thornton, Ottobah Cugoana, Granville Sharp, Elizabeth Hayrick, Sarah Wedgewood, Hannah Moore, Sojourner Truth, James Ramsay and others. The bicentenary commemorations provide ample opportunities for us to remember them, and learn from their indomitable example.

Some suggested activities for churches and community groups:

- Organise a screening of the *Amazing Grace* film in your church or community centre
- Use the *Amazing Grace* film as a topic for debate and discussion over a four week period: some suggested themes are;

Week 1 Slavery: Ancient & Modern

Week 2 Slavery, the Bible and Social Justice

Week 3 'Wilberforce didn't do it all by himself': Discuss.

Week 4 Evangelicals today: citizenship, justice and engagement

- Invite resource people with expertise or experience to facilitate discussions, workshops or seminars on slavery, evangelicalism and social reform
- Participate in the Set all free programme of activities (see web address)
- Visit some of the local and national museums and exhibitions featuring the slave trade
- Set aside a designated Sunday to commemorate the abolition of the Slave Trade Act and the role of Christian witness in this major event
- Use Black History Month (October) to learn more about the major figures in abolition and Emancipation
- Organise a partnership event with other churches or groups in your local community to commemorate the abolition of the Slave Trade Act
- Organise a debate on 'reparations' today, its meaning and significance for church and community relations
- Use the bicentenary as an opportunity to learn more about modern day slavery, and global justice issues, and ways in which church and community leaders can work together and campaign against injustice in the same way that the abolitionists and others worked to tackle evil and injustice in their day.

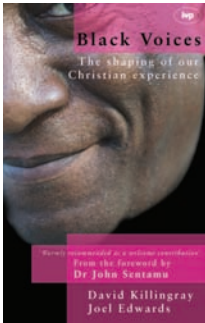
See websites below for additional resources:

Evangelical Alliance: www.eauk.org/resources/info/listings/slaveryresources.cfm

Set all free: www.setallfree.net Stop the Traffic: www.stopthetraffic.org

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¹⁶ Sir James Stephens, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p.194. Cited in Ernest Marshall Howse, *Saints in Politics: The 'Clapham Sect' and the Growth of Freedom*, London, George Allen & Unwin:1976 (first published by University of Toronto Press:1952), p.25.

Additional Resources



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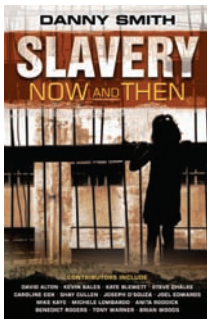
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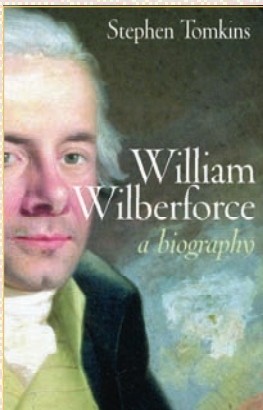
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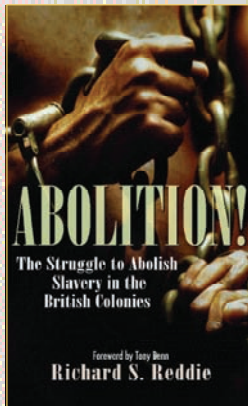
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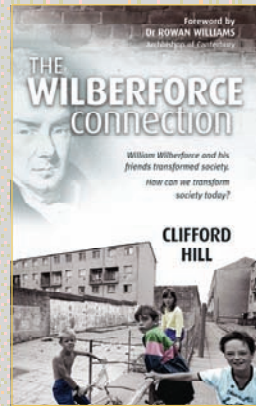
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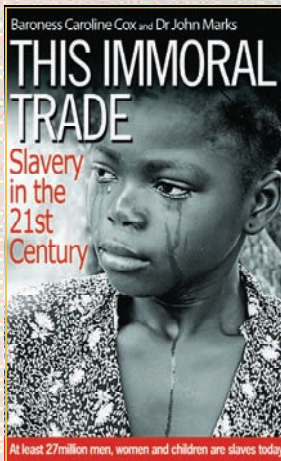
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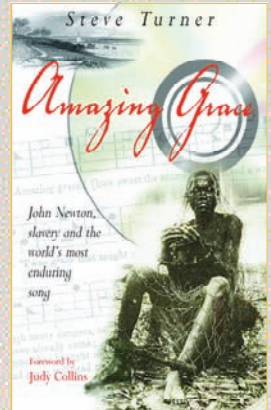
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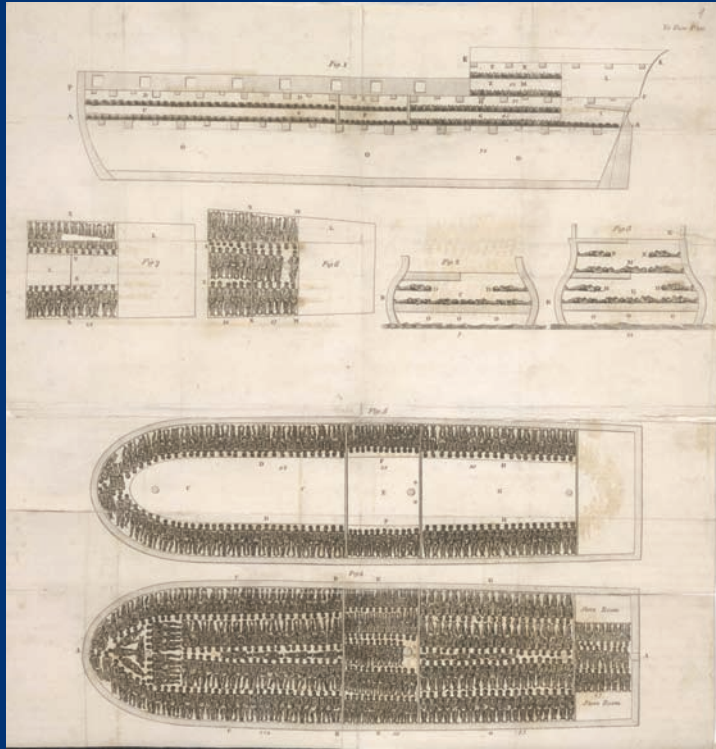


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"I often feel happy and fulfilled and free, too. Happy that my time is my own, that I am studying and may one day qualify to be a nurse and care for people. Happy that one day I might meet the man of my dreams and have children of my own. For me, that would be one way to rebuild the sense of family, identity and security that the years in slavery and exile have taken from me."

(Mende Nazer and Damien Lewis, *Slave: The True Story of a Girl's Lost Childhood and her Fight for Survival*, London, Virago:2004, p. 312.)