**Submission from the United Church of Canada, to the Working Group on People of African Descent for their 2021 report to the UN General Assembly**

**The Urgency of Now: Systemic Racism and opportunities in 2021**

The leadership of The United Church of Canada extends its thanks and appreciation to the United Nations for declaring the years 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent.

This declaration for a focused decade on people of African descent has enabled people of the United Church to deepen its exploration and education on systemic anti-Black racism, and to work in partnership to furthering work in this area.

**Background**

The United Church of Canada is the country’s largest protestant denomination. In 2017, The United Church of Canada made a commitment to engaging with the UN International Decade for People of African Descent, along with our full communion partner the United Church of Christ USA. More background on this joint commitment, and related actions are detailed in this feature article: <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/two-churches-are-better-than-one.pdf>. Some initial background about how some congregations in various parts of the country have engaged the decade locally are also noted in this article.

Our news release from 2018 about our joint commitment offers some additional background: <https://united-church.ca/news/joint-commitment-un-decade-people-african-descent>, as well as this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFkQdEQ1BxA&t=12s>.

**The United Church and Canadian Context**

In January 2018, the Government of Canada announced that it would officially recognize the International Decade for People of African Descent, and noted that it would take concrete measures to work towards creating a more inclusive Canada: <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2018/01/30/prime-minister-announces-government-canada-will-officially-recognize>. That same year, the Prime Minister of Canada noted that racism and unconscious bias exist against Black peoples in Canada: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/mobile/canada/pm-says-time-to-recognize-anti-black-racism-exists-1.3800868>.

Within The United Church of Canada, soon after leadership of the church announced its commitment to the International Decade for People of African Descent, there was initially some concern and resistance from people within the church. Several people within the church scoffed at this new knowledge and wondered why it would be necessary for the Decade to focus specifically on people of African descent, when other identities and racial groups also experience oppression and exclusion. Some stated that there might be other—and more important issues—for the United Nations to focus on.

The United Church is a predominantly White denomination, and many people’s understanding of racism is that it exists in society (but not the church), that racism is only blatant and overt, and that it is a reality for the United States but not for Canada. Further, initial understandings of anti-Black racism as a specific form of systemic racism was at first minimal.

Even when the disproportionate effects of poverty, imprisonment, lower educational achievement, and other systemic inequities that are faced by Black communities in Canada were named and described, some continued to dismiss these as being part of the context for African Americans in the United States, and not realities for Black Canadians.

There is a clear knowledge gap for people in understanding the stark realities faced by people of African descent in Canada. For example, it has also been difficult for some people to make clear links between the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade and systemic anti-Black racism today. Further, understanding anti-Black racism as systemic and entrenched in laws and institutions has been difficult for people to understand. Understanding the church’s complicity and the clear links between contemporary expressions of anti-Black racism and the stark realities faced by Black Canadians is also still a struggle for some. In addition, several people in the church maintain a simplistic understanding of the Underground Railroad, where Canada was a utopic land of freedom where Black peoples came and no longer experienced racial segregation or racial injustice.

Without an understanding of the urgency of anti-Black racism today, some people in the United Church have been slow to respond to work of the UN international decade. The leadership of the United Church continues to work towards helping people understand the church’s role and complicity in slavery and perpetuating anti-Black racism. With this as context, being able to reference the “Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on its mission to Canada” from 2017 has been invaluable for helping people come to a better understand of the Canadian context. Offering current statistics, stories, and analysis from that visit has been very helpful.

In the Canadian context, and in many places around the world, COVID-19 has had a disproportionate effect on Black and racialized communities. In Toronto, Ontario, for example, at one point the rates of infection for Black people in Toronto were 246% higher than people who are not Black. In terms of hospitalizations due to COVID-19, Black people are only 9% of Toronto’s population, but represent 24% of COVID-19 hospitalizations, as noted by Toronto’s Black Scientists’ Task Force on Vaccine Equity (<http://www.torontoblackcovid.com>).

A CBC news story noted that: “The reason that racialized people have a higher rate of positivity, or higher hospitalization rates, is actually because of social inequities, systemic racism and neighborhood vulnerabilities” (<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thehouse/racialized-canadians-vaccine-priority-1.5911952>). There is a clear relationship between health, race, and space; further, ways that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Black and racialized communities is related to systemic racism. When race-based data started being collected in Canada, and such stark racial realities became more apparent, it was clear that this virus did not affect all peoples of all racial backgrounds in the same way. The reasons for these differentials were not biological; they were social. The pandemic has therefore enabled some people in Canada, and within the United Church, to come to a better understanding of systemic racism.

In 2020, the death of George Floyd was a tragedy. For many White people in the church, the horrific death of this Black man at the hands of police escalated their understandings of anti-Black racism and that it was systemic not only in the United States, but also in Canada. More people came to an understanding of the UN Decade as being specific to the realities and struggles of Black peoples, as different from racism that manifests itself against other racialized communities. People in the church were now finally able to name that “Black Lives Matter” and some were willing to work more specifically on anti-Black racism in the Canadian context.

There are still some areas that the church has not been able to fully engage. The church has also not yet been able to apologize for its role in slavery, or work towards reparation. These may be part of future conversations, but are not yet fully part of its current reality.

**Activities on the UN International Decade:**

In addition to what was already named, the United Church has been engaged in the following activities over the course of the Decade:

* Offered daily prayers on issues faced by people of African descent. This prayer cycle can be downloaded from the worship section of the United Church website (<https://united-church.ca/worship-theme/anti-racism-worship>) and the anti-racism webpage (<https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/anti-racism>); daily posts appear on [https://twitter.com/UnitedChurchCda](https://can01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Ftwitter.com%2FUnitedChurchCda&data=04%7C01%7Cahalliday%40united-church.ca%7Cbb1ec976cbb74972288b08d937e43075%7Ccf18b5a826784011931215f0f7157574%7C0%7C0%7C637602275467376725%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=%2FJH%2BZ5Q64aU974p7aM5sKavHgLuXWmbk226izrgdjLg%3D&reserved=0).
* Organized a webinar on anti-Black racism and Afrophobia in the Canadian context, and are writing a short study guide to accompany a video based on this recorded webinar.
* Wrote a public letter, together with other churches, for the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2020 that named a commitment to the UN International Decade for People of African Descent from the signatories. This letter was introduced to the Canadian Council of Churches, and was the basis for the ensuing commitment to anti-Black racism. (The Canadian Council of Churches also later made a commitment to engaging with the UN International Decade for People of African Descent).
* Issued a strong statement that Black Lives Matter to The United Church of Canada.
* Led a series of workshops and educational events with people in the United Church on anti-Black racism in the context of the UN International Decade.
* Worked together with other Canadian churches to create an inter-church (ecumenical) working space on the International Decade for People of African Descent through the Canadian Council of Churches; through this group organized webinars, online events, discussions, short papers, and a study guide.
* Created a Young Black Scholars Program, which is a short-term research project with 6 young adults focused on Black experiences in Canadian churches from a Black lens.
* Advocated with the Canadian government around recognizing, celebrating, and honouring Emancipation Day (August 1).
* In September 2017, at its meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, the 36th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council received the report from the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent about their trip to Canada. The United Church of Canada (through the World Council of Churches’ Commission of the Churches on International Affairs) offered ideas about strengthening the report and suggested additional recommendations.
* On October 31, 2019, in New York City, New York, USA, there was a side event organized by the mandate of the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent. The event was called “Addressing negative racial stereotypes and stereotyping of people of African descent”. The United Church of Canada (through the World Council of Churches’ Commission of the Churches on International Affairs) spoke at this gathering.

**Recommendations for the United Nations:**

Based on our experiences within The United Church of Canada, we would offer the following as recommendations for the United Nations.

* To continue to develop current and contextual analysis and reports on Canadian and other country-specific resources, which can be offered in plain and accessible language and made widely available to people in the country in question,
* To further work on intergenerational trauma and mental health as they affect people of African descent,
* To further the work on COVID-19 and vaccine equity and its disproportionate effects on people of African descent in Canada and around the world,
* To intentionally lead conversations on reparations,
* To continue to encourage governments, civil society, and faith communities to develop clear, tangible, and pro-active strategies to address anti-Black racism recognizing that racial injustice will not end when the UN International Decade comes to an end in 2025.