**Submission from The United Church of Canada, to inform the**

**Special Rapporteur’s 2021 report to the General Assembly on the**

**20th anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action**

**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 efforts of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. In 2019, the United Church made a submission on the subject of reparations upon the request from the office of the Special Rapporteur. The United Church is indeed grateful that the United Nations has declared the years 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent (UN IDPAD). This declaration for a focused decade on people of African descent has enabled people of the United Church to deepen their exploration and education on systemic anti-Black racism, and to work in partnership to further work in this area. In addition, in 2016, the United Church committed to adopting and complying with the principles, norms and standards of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as its [Framework for Reconciliation](https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/undrip-united-church-statement.pdf) as recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

**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 of Canada also declared a [commitment to becoming an anti-racist denomination](https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/anti-racism/about-anti-racism) in October 2020. This recent policy commitment is deeply rooted in the church's national anti-racism policy statement from 2000 called "[That All May Be One](https://documentcloud.adobe.com/spodintegration/index.html?locale=en-us)." The church has since developed a racial justice educational program that includes training the church’s leadership and congregants via racial justice and anti-racism workshops. These anti-racism workshops are mandatory for church clergy, and are open and available for all people in the church. In addition, the church has developed a workshop on regional and local implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples called [A Framework for Reconciliation](https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/undrip-workshop.pdf). In June 2021, the Canadian parliament adopted a new law, [*An Act Respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*](https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/declaration/about-apropos.html#:~:text=On%20June%2021%2C%202021%2C%20the,and%20immediately%20came%20into%20force.&text=The%20purpose%20of%20this%20Act,interpret%20and%20apply%20Canadian%20law.)*.* The National Indigenous Council of The United Church of Canada expressed the hope that in adopting the Declaration and beginning its implementation, the Government of Canada would move to bring colonial systems, including those named in the *Indian Act,* to an end. The Council called for future relationships to be guided by the spirit and intent of the Treaties which articulated a nation-to-nation relationship.

**The United Church and Canadian Context**

In January 2018, the Government of Canada announced that it would [officially recognize](https://unitedchurch-my.sharepoint.com/personal/eyango_united-church_ca/Documents/Identity%26Mission/written%20submissions/Special%20Rapporteur-%20racism%20xenophobia/%3A%20https%3A/pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2018/01/30/prime-minister-announces-government-canada-will-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. That same year, the Prime Minister of Canada noted that [racism and unconscious bias](https://www.ctvnews.ca/mobile/canada/pm-says-time-to-recognize-anti-black-racism-exists-1.3800868) exist against Black peoples in Canada.

In July of 2018, the United Church held its triennial national meeting to determine policy and overall directions for the church over the coming years. At this meeting, there was an unscheduled outpouring of emotions and laments about racism and racial discrimination in the church. This conversation, led by racialized and Indigenous leaders, took place over several hours. In response to this, and to societal examples of subtle and overt racism, in more recent years there have been many ongoing and necessary hard conversations about systemic racism with church leadership. There were also several calls for the church to further sustain efforts to combat racism in church and society.

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 United Nations’ “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 understanding 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, [Indigenous](https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/a-year-later-indigenous-communities-are-fighting-twin-crises-covid-19-and-inequality-1.5280843), 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](https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thehouse/racialized-canadians-vaccine-priority-1.5911952) 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.” There is a clear relationship between health, race, and space; further, ways that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Black, Indigenous, 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.

Indigenous communities’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic were hampered by the limited access to health care in many communities. Remote Indigenous communities, for example, may be served by a nursing station, fly-in doctors, and telehealth or internet based medical services. Individuals requiring hospitalization need to be evacuated out of the community. Pandemic protocols exacerbated the trauma of transportation outside of communities as patients could not be accompanied into distant hospitals by family members. Those who were residential school survivors often were retraumatized in the process. Some Indigenous communities took the hard decision to institute bans on travel into their communities to prevent or at least slow the spread of the virus.

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.

Among racialized groups, the [rise in anti-Asian racism](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/anti-asian-discrimination-angus-reid-poll-1.6056740) has reared its ugly head since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the primary targets have been those of Chinese-descent, the monolithic perception of Asians as a race category has not helped nor prevented other Asian peoples from experiences of racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination. More recently, [a family of four Asian-descent Muslims were "hate crime" victims](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57390398) of a premeditated truck attack in London, Ontario.

Since May 2021, Indigenous communities have reported evidence of over a thousand [unmarked graves](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/tk-eml%C3%BAps-te-secw%C3%A9pemc-215-children-former-kamloops-indian-residential-school-1.6043778) located at the sites of four former residential schools. Most of the over 130 residential schools which operated in Canada were administered by churches, including The United Church of Canada, and funded by the Government of Canada. The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, released in 2015, had detailed how thousands of children had gone missing from the schools and were assumed to have died, though their families often were not informed of their deaths let alone where their remains had been buried. Also prior to the 2021 discoveries, The United Church of Canada participated in commemorating some burial sites and memorializing missing children who went to some United Church schools. However, the well-publicized 2021 announcements of the discovery of some actual sites awakened Canadians’ consciousness nation-wide to the loss of these residential school children and the impact of their loss on their families and communities. A national process of grieving and memorializing these children took place. Of note is that [forty-one percent of surveyed Canadians](https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2021/06/15/two-thirds-of-canadians-knew-just-a-little-or-nothing-about-residential-schools-before-kamloops-discovery-survey-suggests.html) said they didn't learn about the residential school system at all in school. The United Church of Canada responded by reaching out to Indigenous communities whose children had attended United Church run schools to offer support and meetings between church and Indigenous leaders if helpful. The church has made an initial $3 million available to assist communities with searches and commemorative ceremonies as they determine appropriate. The church’s participation in any community work will be based on respect for, the consent of, and the guidance of Indigenous leadership, residential school survivors, and their families. On August 10, 2021, the [Government of Canada announced](https://unitedchurch-my.sharepoint.com/personal/eyango_united-church_ca/Documents/Identity%26Mission/written%20submissions/Special%20Rapporteur-%20racism%20xenophobia/%28https%3A/www.canada.ca/en/crown-indigenous-relations-northern-affairs/news/2021/08/government-of-canada-enhances-support-to-indigenous-communities-to-respond-to-and-heal-from-the-ongoing-impacts-of-residential-schools.htm) additional financial support and the appointment of a Special Interlocutor who will work with Indigenous Peoples, provincial and territorial governments, and Indigenous communities to identify needed measures and make recommendation relating to unmarked and undocumented graves and burial sites at residential schools.

There is also [ongoing neglect of migrant workers who have been experiencing health-care discrimination](https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/may-2020/canadas-covid-19-blind-spots-on-race-immigration-and-labour/) in the workplace. The vast majority of migrant workers are racialized peoples from the global south; the issues facing migrant workers are linked to racism and racial discrimination. This has been more exposed since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. From meat-packing plants in Alberta to farming operations in southwestern Ontario, migrant workers continue to be at risk a year since the pandemic.

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. Some initial work on the subject of reparations for the church’s role in the colonization of Indigenous peoples has begun but also needs to be pursued.

**Activities on combatting racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance:**

In addition to what was already named, the United Church has been engaged in the following activities over the past five years:

* Offered daily prayers on issues faced by people of African descent. This [prayer cycle](https://united-church.ca/worship-theme/anti-racism-worship) can be downloaded from the worship section of the United Church website and the [anti-racism](https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/anti-racism/about-anti-racism) webpage, while appearing on other [regular posts](https://twitter.com/UnitedChurchCda)
* Reassessed and made changes in our curriculum and materials on racial justice to ensure they are non-white centered in language and intent.
* 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.
* Organized a webinar on anti-Asian racism in the Canadian context and in The United Church of Canada to raise awareness and open spaces for conversations on this growing attitude in Canadian society.
* 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.
* In 2017, the Indigenous leadership of The United Church of Canada completed [The Calls to the Church](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/being-community/indigenous-ministries/calls-church): a vision “for the ongoing development of Indigenous Peoples’ mission and ministry and communities of faith within The United Church of Canada." The Calls to the Church are based on the UNDRIP principle of Indigenous self-determination. They were adopted by the church’s General Council in 2018. In 2019, a number of the measures expressed in the document came into fruition with the establishment of an Indigenous Office within the Office of Vocation, Indigenous oversight of Indigenous ministry students, a National Indigenous Elders' Council, and a new National Indigenous Council.
* Through a government-funded [project of Kairos Canada](https://www.kairoscanada.org/what-we-do/migrant-justice/etfw), The United Church of Canada was able to access funding for its affiliated communities of faith that are working to support migrant workers. The project’s key components are information sharing, and capacity building to provide access to resources and services for temporary foreign workers.
* The United Church of Canada is currently engaged in an ecumenical effort to establish a tripartite solidarity platform among faith-based and civil society groups and network. The network seeks to be committed to partnership, empowerment and advocacy for the rights and protections of enforced migrants. The substance of the work of this platform is hospitality, solidarity and justice.

**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, the peoples of Indigenous nations and other racialized groups in Canadian society,
* To further the work on vaccine equity and COVID-19's disproportionate effects on people of African descent, Indigenous, and racialized peoples 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, anti-Indigenous racism, and anti-Asian racism in order to recognize that racial injustice is an ongoing work in both the institutional and individual levels.
* To monitor and report on the implementation of UNDRIP as well as on decolonization efforts made by member nations to address the legacy of nation-building strategies which oppressed, and may continue to oppress, Black, Indigenous, and racialized peoples.