



Global Christian Forum



GCF Newsletter November 2024

Greetings from the Global Christian Forum!

This GCF newsletter shares reflections from the pilgrimage that took place during the Fourth Global Gathering. Participants in the gathering were invited to take a pilgrimage to the Cape Coast Castle, the last point on the Ghanaian coast where enslaved African men and women were imprisoned before being taken to the Americas and the Caribbean. We offer reflections from Dr. Richard Howell, Dr. Natasha Klukach, and Rev. Merlyn Hyde-Riley who all took part in the pilgrimage and the Prayer Service of Lament and Reconciliation which took place after the visit.

We are grateful to God for your commitment to the ministry of Christian unity.

A Transformative Encounter with History

This reflection is an excerpt from Dr. Richard Howell's article "The African experience with Global Christian Forum: the vibrancy of faith, the vulnerability of colour"

In a profound and unexpected turn, approximately 250 delegates from around the globe embarked on a life-altering visit to the Cape Coast Castle, built as a trading post by European colonisers. The transatlantic slave trade was carried on for approximately 366 years, from the early 16th century to the mid-19th century. Visiting the underground dungeons, participants learned about the appalling conditions in which hundreds of thousands of men and women were kept before being shipped across the Atlantic, many dying before or during those perilous journeys.

This historical site, steeped in the sweat and blood of millions of enslaved African men, women, and children, served as more than a mere historical excursion—it was a visceral, haunting reminder of humanity's darkest injustices. This pilgrimage highlighted the need for the Kingdom of God to break into the darkest places, bringing healing and reconciliation.

Walking in the Footsteps of the Oppressed

Walking in the footsteps of those who suffered dehumanisation, we felt the heavy weight of history pressing down upon us. The journey took us into the harrowing depths of the dungeons, where enslaved individuals were held captive in conditions that defy comprehension. Rev. Danielle Dokman reflected on the emotional impact of seeing the blackened floor where her ancestors suffered, emphasising the resilience that led to the birth of a nation and her existence.

Lessons in Resilience and Acknowledgement

Rev. Dokman said, "That was quite an emotional visit for me, as we walked with one another through the door of no return. I knew what had happened because we learned about this in school, but what caught me off guard was seeing the blackened floor where my ancestors were kept, sitting in their blood and faeces – I could not imagine even animals being treated like that. I don't know how people survived in such conditions. But at the same time, a nation was born, and I am a part of that. So, while I mourn, I am also evidence of their resilience, and I value being here because I know the price paid for me to exist."

We were confronted with a haunting question: "Where was God in all this?" The fitting reply echoed through the ages—He was in the dungeon with the enslaved people, suffering alongside them. This revelation starkly reminded us of the Cross, where Jesus, abandoned by the Father, cried out in anguish, "Why have you forsaken me?" Jesus was not in the chapel with those who were supposed to worship Him—the so-called educated whose hollow rituals He detested. It was no wonder He condemned the Pharisees' righteousness as whitewashed graves. Jesus was in solidarity with the oppressed, not in the sanctuaries of the complicit. This powerful truth calls us disciples to stand with the oppressed and embody the love and justice of the Kingdom of God.

Confronting the Complexities of History

Towering above all was the governor's house, a stark testament to colonial power, with its sixteen windows overlooking the horrors beneath. This layering of oppression and sanctimony painted a chilling picture of the past, forcing us to confront the complexities and contradictions of history. The call of the Kingdom is to redeem and transform these historical injustices, bringing hope and reconciliation.

Reflection from Dr. Natasha Klukach

The dark, stifling dungeons of Cape Coast Castle may seem an unusual place of ecumenical pilgrimage for the Global Christian Forum. As participants at the Global Gathering, we walked in the footsteps of millions of enslaved African men, women, and children, through a place of unthinkable suffering. The church positioned above the dungeons gave us a visceral reminder of the complicity of Christianity with the abomination of human slavery.

It was, however, exactly the place of pilgrimage we needed. The calling to Christian unity is inextricably bound up with honouring the image and likeness of God in one another. The Body of Christ is broken whenever and wherever there is oppression and dehumanisation. Our Cape Coast visit was a poignant reminder to repent of past sin, as we did in the Wesley Cathedral, and – crucially – commit to heal the Broken Body. What that means for each of us will perhaps differ depending on our contexts.

It made me reflect on life where I live in the UK, one of the places responsible for the barbaric slave trade. The legacy of the profits from slavery are evident in the grandeur of many of our buildings, including churches. Far worse, however, is the lingering prevalence of racism that continues to bind some whilst others have the benefit of privilege. Moreover, nearly everyday boats full of desperate refugees arrive on the shores of the English Channel less than an hour away from my home. All too often we hear of the people who did not survive the perilous journey. I returned from the Global Gathering determined to understand more about these present-day examples of dehumanisation and the ways I am called through my faith in Christ to be an agent of reconciliation, justice, and peace.

Sharing faith stories reveals the ways in which God lives and moves and breathes in each of us. It is, of course, the well-known charism of the Forum. Our personal stories of discipleship are always intertwined with those of others, as we heard as each shared within our small groups. Facing the horror, sin, and indignity of the slave trade and the church's place within it, we deepened our own faith stories and began a collective story as the Forum.

Our visit to Cape Coast told us that visible unity among churches is not only a theological necessity for the integrity of the faith, but a prophetic calling for Christianity to be an active agent of reconciliation. The call to be one that the world may believe demands that we go into those dark places of the past and the present, honour the imago dei in one another, and heal the brokenness of Christ's Body wherever we encounter it.



Pilgrims visiting the underground cell where enslaved men and women who struggled against their captivity were held prisoner without food, water, or sunlight.



GCF participants lay flowers in the slave dungeon as a memorial to the men and women who lost their lives to the brutality of the transatlantic slave trade.



Rev. Merlyn Hyde Riley delivers her sermon during the Prayer Service of Lament and Reconciliation following the visit to Cape Coast Castle.

Sermon from Rev. Merlyn Hyde Rile

This reflection is an excerpt from the sermon delivered by Rev. Merlyn Hyde-Riley during the Prayer Service of Lament and Reconciliation following the visit to the Cape Coast Castle. The Scripture verses read were Job 29:12-18 & Job 31:13-14.

Given our shared humanity and inherent dignity we need justice for all. This vision of justice is best realized when we practice solidarity as people who are ALL made in the image of God. Throughout this passage there was evidence of Job's solidarity with the poor, with those denied justice.

Unfortunately, we did not hear Job protesting slavery in his reference in vs 13 and 14, but we heard him admitting that his identity was tied up with his slaves. That sows seeds which draw attention to the incompatibility of the practice of slavery and Christian solidarity, for there must be something inherently wrong with slavery itself, a system which reduces someone to property and poverty.

And so, we come together in this place from across the world, we are located differently not only geographically but socially, culturally, and theologically. Our experiences and standpoints are different, but justice looks and feels the same. We come together then in lament and confession, recognizing our failures, yet the possibility that God who is the source of our moral authority can reframe our lives and that as we commit to righteousness and justice, it becomes possible for us to move further along the path of reconciliation to a place of renewal and restoration where each of us can flourish and the community can experience new life, rise like the phoenix, live again and flourish. In solidarity we struggle together recognizing and affirming our common humanity, people created in the image of God, despite our differences. Job reminds us of what is still possible as we draw alongside each other in our commitment to justice in a world of exploitation, oppression, and suffering.

May God help us to Defend Human Dignity, to Display Integrity and to Demonstrate Solidarity so that we may be able to move from a place of brokenness to a place of healing and reconciliation. May God help us so to do.

*So God created humankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

Genesis 1:27

