

**Testimony of**  
**The Right Reverend M. Thomas Shaw, III, SSJE**  
**Bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts**  
**December 18, 2007**

Oversight Hearing on the Legacy of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade  
Committee on the Judiciary  
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties  
B353 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

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Thank you, Chairman Conyers. My name is Tom Shaw. I am the Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts and I am honored to be here with this distinguished panel. As you may know, I was an intern in Representative Amo Houghton's office in 2000, so I am particularly pleased to be back in Washington for this important oversight hearing on the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

I should state at the outset that we, as a church, have asked God's forgiveness for our complicity in and the injury done by the institution of slavery and its aftermath. Unlike the Quakers who were leaders in the abolitionist movement, too many Episcopalians did not raise their voices when God would have wished them to do so. Episcopalians were owners of slaves and of the ships that brought them to this land. Episcopalians lived in the north and in the south and, as a privileged church, we today recognize that our Church benefited materially from the slave trade.

The Episcopal Church in the decades leading to the American Civil War did not formally address the problem of slavery. The post- Revolutionary War church wanted to avoid a schism within the church, which it was successful at doing (unlike the divisions that had occurred to Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist churches during this period over the issue of slavery) but avoiding that schism meant not addressing the issue of slavery in any official or collective way. With that painful history as background, our 75<sup>th</sup> General Convention meeting in 2006 looked to the upcoming bicentennial commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade as a time in which we could affirm "our commitment to become a transformed, anti-racist church and to work toward healing, reconciliation, and a restoration of wholeness to the family of God."

As background I should explain that when our General Convention speaks it speaks for our whole church and only after careful discernment. The members of this committee would feel quite at home at our General Convention. It consists of a House of Deputies and a House of Bishops, and legislative committees that hold hearings such as this. Legislation must pass both Houses in the same form. So the voice of the General Convention is very much the voice of the Episcopal Church.

And with that voice, we looked to what we could do as the Episcopal Church, as individuals, as parishes and dioceses – a diocese being a collection of churches in a single geographic area - and also what we could ask you, the Congress, to do. This is what the Episcopal Church decided:

- We apologized as a Church for our complicity in, and the injury done by, the institution of slavery and its aftermath.” We repented of this sin and asked God’s grace and forgiveness, ever mindful that we did so far too late.
- We recognized that slavery is a fundamental betrayal of the humanity of all persons and a “sin that continues to plague our common life in the Church and our culture.” Furthermore we expressed “our most profound regret that (a) The Episcopal Church lent the institution of slavery its support and justification based on Scripture, and (b) after slavery was formally abolished, The Episcopal Church continued for at least a century to support de jure and de facto segregation and discrimination.”
- We called upon the “Congress and the American people to support legislation initiating study of and dialogue about the history and legacy of slavery in the United States and of proposals for monetary and non-monetary reparations to the descendants of the victims of slavery.” We, therefore, fully support H.R. 40 which would establish a commission to examine those very issues and recommend appropriate remedies.
- We asked every Diocese “to collect and document ... detailed information in its community on (a) the complicity of The Episcopal Church in the institution of slavery and in the subsequent history of segregation and discrimination and (b) the economic benefits The Episcopal Church derived from the institution of slavery.” A report on that work will be

made to our 2009 General Convention on how the Church can be “the repairer of the breach” (Isaiah 58:12), both materially and relationally, and achieve the spiritual healing and reconciliation that will lead us to a new life in Christ.” We believe that work essential to determining the remedies that might be considered.

Work is underway in a number of our dioceses, including Mississippi, where research on slavery and its impact on building the city of Natchez has already disclosed that its oldest Episcopal Church was built by slaves. The rector of St. Paul’s Delray Beach in Southeast Florida is writing a history of the presence of, and contributions of blacks in the Episcopal Church in Florida. We are hopeful that what we learn will be helpful to the commission that would be established under H.R. 40. We know that our exploration has just begun and that next year’s release of the film *Traces of the Trade* -- a documentary being made by Katrina Brown, an Episcopalian from Rhode Island whose ancestors were involved in the slave trade -- will open the eyes of many to the legacy of slavery for both black and white Americans, and the role of the North in its perpetuation.

- Finally, we asked the elected leader of our church, the Presiding Bishop, to name a Day of Repentance and on that day to hold a Service of Repentance at the Washington National Cathedral, and each Diocese to hold a similar service. The Dioceses of New York, Newark, New Jersey and Long Island are joining in a service in commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City on January 13, 2008. The National Cathedral event will be October 4, 2008 and we invite all of you to attend.

The full text of each of these resolutions is included as an appendix to my testimony as well as two pastoral letters, 1994 and 2006, from the House of Bishops on the sin of racism:

Each of these actions is important and together they represent our effort to be “repairers of the breach.” We have much to overcome, and as the British Parliamentarian and crusader against slavery William Wilberforce told the House of Commons in 1789: “We are all guilty – we ought to all plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing blame on others.” The history that we are researching is essential to understanding our Church’s role in the institution of slavery and its perpetuation. With fuller knowledge will come true

repentance that will then open us to reconciliation and remedies that we believe are yet to be revealed.

Ten years after Wilberforce's speech, on December 30, 1799, the first black priest in the Episcopal Church in the United States, Absalom Jones, and 70 fellow signatories petitioned the House of Representatives to protect those taken by slave traders. They concluded their petition with these words:

*"In the Constitution, and the Fugitive bill, no mention is made of Black people or Slaves — therefore if the Bill of Rights, or the declaration of Congress are of any validity, we beseech that as we are men, we may be admitted to partake of the Liberties and unalienable Rights therein held forth — firmly believing that the extending of Justice and equity to all Classes, would be a means of drawing down the blessings of Heaven upon this Land, for the Peace and Prosperity of which, and the real happiness of every member of the Community, we fervently pray.*

Nine years later, on January 1, 1808 Jones would celebrate the end of US participation in the transatlantic slave trade:

*The history of the world shows us, that the deliverance of the children of Israel from their bondage, is not the only instance, in which it has pleased God to appear in behalf of oppressed and distressed nations, as the deliverer of the innocent, and of those who call upon his name. He is as unchangeable in his nature and character, as he is in his wisdom and power. The great and blessed event, which we have this day met to celebrate, is a striking proof, that the God of heaven and earth is the same, yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. (January 1, 1808 St. Thomas Church, Philadelphia)*

We continue to pray for Absalom Jones's "real happiness of every member of the Community," knowing that the "blessed event" of January 1, 1808 was an important step, not the final step, in the emancipation of slaves. As the Episcopal Church resolved in 2006, we are committed to becoming "a transformed, anti-racist church and to work toward healing, reconciliation, and a restoration of wholeness to the family of God." We believe the work we are doing to research our Church's complicity in the institution of the slave trade will help us, the Episcopal Church, to be transformed. We also believe that H.R. 40 will aid the nation in its own continued healing. We look forward to the opportunity to continue this important and necessary work together.