

Language as Reparative Practice

Britain Yearly Meeting Reparation Working Group

Words, their rationale, and a living glossary

Statement on Language

On the issue of language, the Britain Yearly Meeting Reparation Working Group began with a simple but significant step: humanising the words we use to describe people who had things done to them.

We moved away from 'slavery', from 'transatlantic chattel slavery', and from the noun 'slaves'. In their place, we use language that humanises the people and makes visible the actions that resulted in their condition. Rather than a 'slave' — a word that feels remote, even static — we name the person as 'enslaved', because enslavement is something that was done to them; a process they were forced to live within.

Rather than 'transatlantic chattel slavery', which can read as a business transaction, we speak of 'the trafficking of Africans across the Atlantic'. The word 'trafficking' denotes a criminal act and, we hope, evokes the moral revulsion that act deserves. We use 'enslavement' rather than 'slavery' for the same reason: it is a process, not a category. We talk about the economy and violence of enslavement to reflect the commodification of human beings: this speaks more to the truth of the existence rather than the economic and dehumanising 'slave trade'.

That was the beginning of our journey. But over the past two and a half years we have learnt so much more — words to use, words to set aside, and new words of our own. In this paper, we share the reasons behind our choices and invite you to join us.

We have spoken with people living with the legacy of enslavement. We say 'living' deliberately: rather than 'descendants of slaves' we call them 'people who are living with a legacy', because it is an all-encompassing reality. A legacy of enslavement is something inherited not only from one's antecedents, but from the conditioned environment those antecedents lived in — the emotions, the experiences, the generational trauma passed down through generations, and the ongoing water in which one swims: the racism encountered, the discrimination, the inequity, the absence of generational wealth and confidence that says, 'we can do this'.

We have renamed our Working Group the 'reparation' working group. This reflects us following the lead of Sonja Stanley Niaah of the UWI: reparation is a continuous process, not a series of acts. It separates our work from the legacy of the first World/European War, it grounds us in the act of this Quaker faith movement and distinguishes our endeavours from those of state institutions. We understand that our journey is long and progress may be slow. Indeed, it will be those living with the legacy who will determine whether our acts are reparative in their eyes.

We have also sought to understand the environment beyond the transatlantic experience. For example, we have learned that, for some, that the name 'America' is itself a colonial project: using it frames that part of the world through the coloniser's lens. We are in discussions about using to name the lands of the Western Hemisphere 'Turtle Island' instead of 'North America and Canada' and 'Abya Yala' instead of 'Central and South America'.

We have spoken with Friends across the continent of Africa, and Friends in the western hemisphere. We talked about what they are living with, and about language. We recognise that English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and others are colonial languages. We therefore question whether these should always be the languages of dialogue — both within the Quaker world and beyond it¹. If we genuinely wish to share space, are we willing to be the ones who must catch up, who require a translator, rather than always being those who determine what is discussed and in which tongue? The language of discussion ultimately frames the discussion itself.

We challenge ourselves on the word 'partnership' in religious and cross-cultural contexts. When the agenda is set by Europeans, speaking of 'joint endeavours' or 'joint enterprises' may more honestly reflect the work of redistribution still needed. This concern is repeatedly raised by individuals across the continent of Africa, the Caribbean, those residing in the Western Hemisphere and Abya Yala.

The words we use matter. They matter to those who receive them. They matter to us as those who initiate. The words we choose frame the conversation, set the feeling in the room the moment we open our mouths, and shape how comfortable — or uncomfortable — our interlocutors are. They reveal whether we exercise care, whether we see our partners as full persons, whether we offer them a voice in the very language of discussion.

We cannot always succeed. But we ask that we try — and that with every attempt, we place people's comfort and dignity at the centre. We also question whether English should always be the primary language of ministry when others in the room speak it as a second or additional language.

At its core, our journey is to humanise, use our words to enable transparency with the hope that equity and justice can be our collective endeavour.

¹ We note that the four languages of Welsh, Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic are also spoken by Friends in the UK.

Glossary of Terms

Terms in Current Use

The following terms have been adopted by the Working Group over the past two and a half years. Each entry explains what it replaces and why.

Term / Phrase	Replaces / Context	Rationale
Enslavement	<i>Slavery / being a slave</i>	Foregrounds that this was an act done to a person — an ongoing process imposed upon them — rather than a fixed identity.
Enslaved person	<i>Slave</i>	Restores humanity to the individual. The condition was imposed, not intrinsic.
The trafficking of Africans across the Atlantic	<i>Transatlantic chattel slavery / the slave trade</i>	Centres the human crime and its perpetrators. 'Human trafficking' evokes moral revulsion; 'chattel' and 'trade' risk framing atrocity as commerce.
People living with a legacy of enslavement	<i>Descendants of slaves</i>	Captures the present-tense, all-encompassing reality: inherited trauma, systemic racism, inequity, and the ongoing environment in which people live.
Turtle Island	<i>North America / USA, Canada, and Greenland</i>	" Turtle Island " is the term, translated into English, used by some Indigenous peoples of the North of the Western Hemisphere to refer to Earth[1] or North America (including Canada, Greenland and the USA). The name is based on an oral history once common to the Indigenous peoples of the Northeastern Woodlands, which today roughly encompasses

Term / Phrase	Replaces / Context	Rationale
		southeastern Canada and the northeastern United States By using this term, we would avoid imposing a colonial frame on the land and its peoples. Turtle Island in Lenape is Tulpehaken.
Abya Yala	<i>Latin America / South America</i>	Name used by Guna/Chibchan Indigenous peoples of the Southern and Central Western Hemisphere.
Colonial languages	<i>(English, French, Spanish, Portuguese used without comment)</i>	Acknowledges that the languages of dialogue are themselves products of colonisation and carry embedded power dynamics.
Joint endeavour / joint enterprise	<i>Partnership (in religious or cross-cultural contexts)</i>	'Partnership' implies equality; when agendas are set by one party, the word obscures the imbalance. 'Joint endeavour' invites honest renegotiation.

Proposed Additions

The terms below are proposed for adoption. They arise from ongoing conversations and reflect patterns of language that the Working Group believes would deepen the reparative intent of our work. They are offered for discernment and discussion.

Term / Phrase	Replaces / Context	Rationale
Reparative dialogue	<i>Reconciliation / reparations conversation</i>	Centres active repair rather than the more passive 'reconciliation'; signals that dialogue itself is part of the reparative work.
Agenda-holding	<i>Leadership / chairing</i>	Makes visible who controls what is discussed. Naming it opens space to redistribute that power deliberately.
Language-of-welcome	<i>Common language / working language</i>	Shifts the question from efficiency to hospitality: whose language makes people feel welcomed and whose excludes them.
Ministry in translation	<i>Translated ministry / interpretation</i>	Reframes translation as an act of ministry in itself — care, not administrative inconvenience — and honours the translator's role.
Colonial frame / colonial lens	Western perspective / Eurocentric view	Explicitly names the political origin of the perspective rather than softening it to geography or culture.
Cultural assimilation and land displacement centre	Boarding school	Explicitly names the intention of the institutions: to eradicate the culture of indigenous people sent there and to 'free up' the land for exploitation by European settlers.

A Living Document

This glossary is not fixed. Language is a living practice, and this document will grow as we continue to listen — to people living with the legacy of enslavement, to our Friends in the Caribbean, across the continent of Africa, the Western Hemisphere and Abya Yala, and to the Spirit that guides us. We welcome additions, challenges, and corrections.

If you choose to join us on this journey, we welcome you.

Key – terms agreed by RWG, terms currently under review