

## **R-1 Resolution to General Convention on Adding Anti-Slavery Activists to the Church Calendar**

**Resolved**, by the 231st Annual Convention of the Diocese of Virginia, that the following resolution be presented to the 82nd General Convention:

*Resolved*, the House of \_\_\_\_ concurring, that the church calendar be amended to add Thomas Clarkson and Olaudah Equiano, leading figures in the British abolitionist movement, to the commemoration of William Wilberforce on July 30th; and be it further

*Resolved*, That the General Convention direct the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to prepare appropriate biblical lessons, collects, and other liturgical resources to commemorate the life and work of Thomas Clarkson and Olaudah Equiano.

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submitted by:

**The Rev. Deacon Mary Cushing**

### **Explanation**

Renowned British parliamentarian William Wilberforce is justifiably commemorated on July 30th for his anti-slavery activism. However, the commemoration overlooks the comparable impact on the abolitionist cause of two of his associates, Thomas Clarkson and Olaudah Equiano. The Church of England recognizes all three together on July 30th, and this resolution proposes that The Episcopal Church do likewise. Clarkson and Equiano are models of public witness to advance reform, and their impact extended beyond Great Britain. Both men demonstrated personal courage and a moral compass by distancing themselves from the Church of England—to which they belonged—because of its connections to the slave trade. Commemorating Equiano would additionally elevate the profile and voice of a formerly enslaved individual.

**Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846):** Clarkson's work models diaconal support for the oppressed and the pursuit of mission to reconcile humanity. The son of an Anglican priest, Clarkson as a young man intended to join the clergy and was ordained a deacon in 1783. After researching slavery—a topic about which he was previously ignorant—for an essay contest, he discerned a call to devote his time to abolition. Together with Anglican and Quaker associates, Clarkson helped establish the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 and also helped recruit parliamentarian William Wilberforce to the cause. While the efforts of Wilberforce are more widely known, Clarkson played a critical supporting role through his extensive research and eloquent publications that supplied evidence of slavery's cruelty and helped turn public opinion. In this, Clarkson serves as an example of applying one's gifts to God's service: his writing skills were praised by no less than Jane Austen, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Coleridge. Great Britain abolished first the slave trade (1807) and then slavery itself (1833), but Clarkson continued to crusade for abolition worldwide until his death. Never ordained a priest, Clarkson drifted from the Church of England and ultimately felt more at home among the Quakers. He nonetheless is honored on the Church of England's calendar and has a commemorative tablet in Westminster Abbey.

**Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797):** Originally from an area in present-day Nigeria, Olaudah Equiano was captured and enslaved at age 11. He was brought to the Americas, living for a time in

Virginia, but traveled widely after he was sold to a naval officer. He learned to read and write and received early instruction in Christianity from the officer's relatives. From his next owner, Equiano learned business skills which he parlayed for personal gain, saving enough money to buy his freedom in 1766. Equiano eventually settled in England and became involved in the abolitionist movement. In 1789 he published his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. It became a bestseller and went through multiple editions, including in translation to other languages. Equiano's first-hand witness to atrocities and eloquent writing helped turn British public opinion against slavery. Accounts of Equiano's faith life vary. Official Church of England sources state he was baptized (as Gustavus Vassa) as an enslaved adolescent in 1759, while his autobiography describes how he personally accepted Jesus as his savior in 1774. Equiano was also attracted to evangelical Methodism; he was acquainted with renowned preacher George Whitefield and, ultimately, was buried at a Methodist chapel. A commemorative plaque hangs at St. Margaret's Church Westminster, where Equiano was baptized; other Church of England parishes annually celebrate their links to him and his family.

The Church of England provides this collect for July 30th:

God our deliverer,  
who sent your Son Jesus Christ  
to set your people free from the slavery of sin:  
grant that, as your servants William Wilberforce,  
Olaudah Equiano, and Thomas Clarkson  
toiled against the sin of slavery,  
so we may bring compassion to all  
and work for the freedom of all the children of God;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This proposed resolution does not conflict with the Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church or of The Diocese of Virginia.

This resolution would have no immediate financial impact. However, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* would need to be updated and reissued at some point to include information about Clarkson and Equiano.