

GROWING Together

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THUS SAYS THE LORD, THE GOD OF ISRAEL, 'LET MY PEOPLE GO'.

William Wilberforce 1759 - 1833

As a boy, William Wilberforce was deeply influenced by the Methodism of John Wesley. He learned that the gospel of Jesus Christ not only changes lives spiritually but commands all people to reach out to human need. A former slaveship captain, John Newton, was a frequent visitor. Newton had embraced evangelical Christianity, and later wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*.

The seed which grew to inspire William Wilberforce was planted in those early years. Some time passed before the plight of the slaves became the spiritual issue driving him throughout his life. At the University of Cambridge Wilberforce became friends with a fellow student, William Pitt. Pitt went on to become Prime Minister and Wilberforce a Member of Parliament. Wilberforce later confessed, "For the first years in Parliament I did nothing - nothing to any purpose". But when he was twenty-seven years old, he experienced a spiritual rebirth, saying, "My walk is a public one. My business is in the world".

Wilberforce had the qualifications and convictions to seek ordination but he believed God wanted a different calling for him. His attention was now drawn to the issue of human slavery he had first learned about as a child.

It is estimated that between 1700 and 1810 British merchant ships transported almost three million Africans across the Atlantic. With the support of William Pitt, Wilberforce attempted to persuade fellow parliamentarians to pass an Anti-Slavery Bill, but he was blocked at every turn, especially by those who profited from the slave-trade. Many



continued to believe that slavery was not only good for the economy but actually benefited the slaves themselves. Wilberforce was routinely vilified by those who spoke of "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies".

While Wilberforce led the campaign in Parliament, the abolitionists' message was taken to the countryside by others. Some joined a consumer boycott of sugar, the product of the slave plantations, while others wore a porcelain cameo featuring an African slave in chains and bearing the words "Am I not a man and a brother?"

Poor health dogged Wilberforce throughout his life, but he persisted despite his daily discomfort. Finally, in 1807, Parliament voted to abolish the slave trade throughout the British Empire. British social historian G.M. Trevelyan said that Wilberforce's accomplishments should be remembered as "one of the turning events in the history of the world".

While Wilberforce is best known for his lifelong passion to end the slave trade, he also used his influence as a Christian parliamentarian to campaign on behalf of the underprivileged, including chimney sweeps, single mothers, working class children and ill-treated juveniles in trouble with the law.

We owe a tremendous debt to people of faith and courage like him. They inspire us to reach beyond what we believe to be possible. Wilberforce lost many battles on the floor of the House of Commons but, in Christ's Name, he persevered - achieving freedom for thousands who hitherto had known only poverty, humiliation and brutality. For them, as for John Newton, this was truly, *Amazing Grace*.

Wilberforce would be saddened to learn that slavery has never been fully abolished. In our own day, it continues to flourish on every continent. Although national governments and non-governmental agencies work tirelessly to stop it, millions of children, women and men worldwide are kidnapped, abused and frequently sold into the sex-trade or oppressed as bonded labourers - even here in Canada.

GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ's faithful.

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