



# COMING TO THE TABLE

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## Contacting ‘Linked Descendants’

Many Coming to the Table community members have a relationship with one or more ‘linked descendants’ (one’s ancestor enslaved the other’s ancestor), and tend to consider a respectful relationship with a linked descendant an act of repairing the harms of slavery and creating a new legacy.

If you are interested in finding and contacting one or more linked descendants, we offer these suggestions to help you proceed.

There is no way to know ahead of time if you will succeed, and if you do, how you will be received. The experience of most white people involved in Coming to the Table has been a welcome and appreciative response from African Americans. A cool or hostile response has been reported more often by African Americans reaching out to white descendants. How well things go will depend partly on how well you have prepared yourself mentally and emotionally. Read our handout “Confronting Slavery in Your Family’s History,” and spend some time in reflection about your hopes, fears and motivations.

Once you are ready to begin looking, read our handout “Researching Slaveholding and Slave Trading Ancestry,” particularly point number 10, for ideas about how to proceed. This type of research is somewhat different than looking for long-dead ancestors.

If you have found someone you think may be connected to your family and are considering making contact, these questions may help you further clarify your goals, hopes, and fears:

- How would you feel about getting an enthusiastic response? A hostile response? A suspicious response? No response? An immediate response? A long wait?
- What information are you ready to share with them?
- Are you ready to listen, accept them exactly where they are, pass no judgments, and not take rejection personally?
- What are your fantasies about the people you may contact? Try to work through these so you can go forward with no assumptions, ready to live into the experience with an open heart.
- Is a blood relationship part of the information you have uncovered? If so, how do you feel about that? If not, how would you feel if they offered such information? Many of us are finding we have “unexpected cousins.” You are not alone! We are all far more connected than most of us realize.

### **When you feel ready to proceed, here are some ideas for making contact.**

If you have an address for someone you want to reach out to, write an email or a letter introducing yourself, explaining your reason for contacting them, spelling out what you believe is or may be your connection, and sharing at least some of the information you have gathered in your research. Tell them a little about yourself and your family. Be honest, not pretending you are someone you are not. Give them a sense of your intent, and give them some options for



how to respond (email, phone call, snail mail), including an invitation to take whatever time they need to talk with their family and think about a response.

You may discover that you are connected through slavery to someone in your local community, especially if you are living in the same area where your ancestors lived. This of course makes a face-to-face meeting much more possible, sooner rather than later, and may pose additional challenges.

If you are from a white family and are reaching out to descendants of people enslaved by your family, be ready to listen at least as much as you talk since white people often do not listen well to African Americans. We recommend that you do not include an apology or request for forgiveness for the actions of your ancestors in any *initial* contact. Even without words of apology, if you 'come to the table' needing forgiveness and communicate that in your actions and tone of voice, you can be adding a burden rather than contributing to repair.

If you have sent an initial email or letter and don't get a reply within a couple of weeks, you may decide to re-send, or to follow up with a phone call, if you have a number to try. Phoning is trickier, because you may be putting someone in an uncomfortable position by calling. Give some thought to timing. Be sure you can stay on the phone for a while without interruption, in case you reach someone. If you reach someone who is not interested in family history, or not interested in talking with you, ask if they know of someone else who might talk with you. Talk through with someone ahead

of time how you want to introduce yourself to get a conversation going.

Once you make contact, be ready to go with the flow. Plan to allow time for a relationship to develop, and be aware that an ongoing relationship is a possibility, not necessarily an outcome.

As things progress, talk with your trusted supporters or write in your journal about how things are going, how you are feeling, and what your motivations may be for things you want to say or do. Be prepared to follow up on offers and commitments. A genuine tone of respect, interest, and acknowledgment of what happened in the past can do much to bring repair and healing, whereas confused motivations and lack of follow-through can bring more pain.

Be aware that you may be treated with suspicion at first. Trust takes time to build. You may, though, be welcomed with eager enthusiasm and considered family from the get go. Be ready for either, or neither one. Focus on building a relationship at a pace that seems to work for both of you.

One issue is worth special attention here. Some linked descendants are also related by blood. Part of the painful history of slavery is the fact that enslavers held power, and many used that power to force enslaved women sexually. While there were occasional cases of genuine relationship, even marriage, force was far more common. Understandably, this can be an additional point of pain for descendants. At the same time, for some people a blood connection is reason (or more reason) to consider one another family.

## Mission

Seeking to acknowledge, understand and heal the persistent wounds of the U.S. institution of race-based slavery and its legacies.

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A program of the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University

