

A Call for Repentance and Reparations

Submitted by:

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The Rev. Rita Powell, Canonically Resident Clergy, Cambridge, Harvard Chaplaincy
The Rev. Tim Schenck, Canonically Resident Clergy, Hingham, St. John's
Ms. Carole Simon, Lay Delegate, Boston, Church of St. Augustine and St. Martin
The Rev. Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Canonically Resident Clergy, Boston, St. Stephen's
The Rev. Liz Steinhauer, Canonically Resident Clergy, Boston, St. Stephen's
The Rev. Leslie K. Sterling, Canonically Resident Clergy, Cambridge, St. Bartholomew
The Rev. Evan L. Thayer, Canonically Resident Clergy, Boston, Church of St. Augustine and St. Martin
The Rev. Deborah M. Warner, Canonically Resident Clergy, Woods Hole, Church of the Messiah

Resolved, that the Trustees of Donations and the congregations and institutions of the Diocese of Massachusetts (such as: Episcopal City Mission and the Boston Episcopal Charitable Society and others) -- in the name of repentance, reconciliation, and accountability to our siblings of color in our Diocese -- are invited prayerfully and purposefully to explore their historic involvement in and present wealth derived from the forced labor of enslaved people; and be it further

Resolved, that in order to implement the above resolution, this Convention requests that the diocesan Racial Justice Commission form a Reparations Committee, and requests that the Reparations Committee prepare a toolbox of resources to assist congregations and individual Episcopalians in the examination of their resources and their history; and be it further

Resolved, that the Trustees of Donations and the congregations and institutions of the Diocese of Massachusetts, who have accepted this invitation, are asked to report their progress and actions to the Racial Justice Commission no later than the next Convention of the Diocese of Massachusetts, November 2021; and be it further

Resolved, that the Reparations Committee with the Racial Justice Commission is asked to explore models and best practices for the creation of a Reparations Fund, and will report to the next Diocesan Convention on their recommendations for remedies including the distribution of funds from our unrestricted endowments and from our restricted endowments as may be permissible in fiscal year 2022 and beyond in acknowledgment of and repentance for the sin and legacy of slavery; and be it further

Resolved, that the Bishop of the Diocese and the Chairs of the Racial Justice Commission are asked to report to Diocesan Convention next year and in subsequent years to provide an update on how the diocese is progressing towards full disclosure as reparations continues.

Explanation

“Reparations are about looking forward, not just looking back.”

-The Very Rev. Canon Kelley Brown Douglas, Dean of Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological

“Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail

The COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting economic crisis, and the public focus on police brutality against people of color have revealed once again this year the depth of systemic racism that continues to afflict our society. This moment is calling us to take meaningful action – action which we believe is long overdue. This resolution calls on the Trustees of Donations, who manage both the diocesan endowment and many parish endowments, and each congregation to engage in this process, and invites other Diocesan-related organizations such as Episcopal City Mission and the Boston Episcopal Charitable Society, Church Home Society, as well as individual Episcopalians and families in the Diocese to participate.

General Convention in 2006 passed [Resolution 2006-CO11](#). This resolution stated:

Resolved, That the 75th General Convention, affirming our commitments to become a transformed, anti-racist church and to work toward healing, reconciliation, and a restoration of wholeness to the family of God, urge the Church at every level to call upon 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.¹

Concurrently, General Convention passed [Resolution 2006-A123](#), which stated in part:

¹ General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of...The Episcopal Church, Columbus, 2006* (New York: General Convention, 2007), p. 666.

Resolved, That the 75th General Convention of The Episcopal Church through the Executive Council urgently initiate a comprehensive program and urge every Diocese to collect and document during the next triennium 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; and direct the Committee on Anti-Racism to monitor this program and report to Executive Council each year by March 31 on the progress in each Diocese.²

In 2007, then Bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts M. Thomas Shaw, SSJE, representing then Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, [testified in Congress](#) on behalf of H.R. 40, calling for the establishment of a federal Commission to Study Reparations Proposals for African-Americans. In his testimony, Bishop Shaw said: "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."³

In 2008, a resolution was put before Diocesan Convention calling on the Diocese to implement the General Convention resolution A123, specifically to implement "a process for collecting and documenting detailed information on (a) the complicity of The Episcopal Church in Massachusetts in the institution of slavery and in the subsequent history of segregation and discrimination, and (b) the economic benefits The Episcopal Church and its parishes in Massachusetts derived from the institution of slavery, and we call on the Bishops to report the results of this inquiry, as requested, to the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church." While important work was begun as a result, no significant study of the history was done, and what was done was not disseminated nor were any actions taken as a result of what was revealed. It speaks to the power of systemic racism that no material change resulted, and no funds were allocated for reparations or other remedies.

We believe this critical and necessary work is long overdue, and must begin immediately. The urgency of this moment and the continued evidence of white supremacy culture; the unreckoned-with legacy of slavery, genocide, and Jim Crow codes; the current anti-immigrant movements; ongoing red-lining and restrictive housing covenants; present voter suppression and regressive tax policies; increasing police brutality and mass incarceration all demand a response from our church. We believe we cannot with integrity stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and those who are calling for justice if we have not examined our past and held ourselves accountable for the history on which our church and its resources are built.

We are compelled by the examples of institutions which have undertaken this difficult but necessary work:

[Christ Church Old North](#), Boston has led the way in our own Diocese, publishing research linking the church and the funding of its famous steeple to slaveholding Episcopalians.⁴

[Virginia Theological Seminary](#) has created a \$1.7 million reparations fund.⁵

In 2019, [the Diocese of Long Island](#) began a similar process and committed funds to reparations. Other dioceses, including Maryland, have begun to take steps in confronting their past.⁶

² General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of...The Episcopal Church, Columbus, 2006* (New York: General Convention, 2007), pp. 664-665.

³ <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/article/too-many-episcopalians-were-silent-slavery-massachusetts-bishop-tells-congressional>

⁴ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/10/26/old-north-church-cherished-symbol-opens-about-link-slavery/tOKwIqLkBgaujRLyWELPfJ/story.html>

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/09/10/virginia-theological-seminary-reparations-slavery/>

⁶ <https://www.dioceseli.org/media/diocesan-news/diocese-of-long-island-designates-funds-for-reparations-and-reli>

In 2020, [the Diocese of Texas](#) announced during its recent Diocesan Council that it will devote a record-breaking \$13 million to a reparations initiative “that aims to repair and commence racial healing for individuals and communities who were directly injured by slavery in the diocese.”⁷

Outside of the Episcopal context, institutions have gone further, with [Princeton Theological Seminary](#) in 2019 creating a \$28 million reparations fund.⁸

As one of the largest and wealthiest dioceses in the country, we believe our continued inaction on this issue is unacceptable and not in keeping with our baptismal covenant or our Gospel call to justice.

From limited research, we know that William Appleton, who contributed significant funds to the creation of ECM, Trinity Church, the Boston Episcopal Charitable Society and St. Stephen’s in Boston, was one of the wealthiest people in Massachusetts. His wealth was derived from his ownership of ships which carried commodities around the triangle of New England, the West Indies, and Great Britain. We know that Isaac Royall Jr, a member of Christ Church, Cambridge and resident of Medford, owned at least sixty slaves. Through such wealthy individuals, our Diocese, its congregations, and the endowments held by these institutions benefited materially from the unpaid labor of enslaved people and the economic trading of goods made with their labor. A thorough engagement with our past will reveal the need for repentance, reconciliation and reparations.

We are heartened by the work of the newly-formed diocesan Racial Justice Commission, which is working to further our commitment to end racism and other forms of oppression. We believe that all Episcopalians in the Diocese of Massachusetts are being called to respond to the ongoing injustice resulting from white supremacy culture - injustice which still creates an enormous divide in terms of education and opportunity for young people in our own churches, from Wellesley to Lawrence, and from Chestnut Hill to Dorchester. This moment and the Black Lives Matter movement call for nothing less than our full and honest engagement and response.

Last June, [Bishop Eugene Sutton testified to Congress](#) in support of H.R. 40, calling for the establishment of a federal Commission to Study Reparations Proposals for African-Americans. He said, in part: “If you are happy with the state of race relations in America, do nothing. If you are not happy, support the establishment of this commission for discussion and study.” Endorsing Bishop Sutton’s prophetic witness, we believe doing nothing cannot be an option any more.⁹

A year of study, or more if necessary, followed by the creation of a significant reparations fund to benefit Black and Brown congregations, communities, and individuals, will begin to give our church the freedom, healing and credibility it needs to be a leader and ally in movements for racial and economic justice. Once the research has been done, and a fund created, we believe communities of color should make decisions about how to implement just remedies.

For further reading on the need for reparations as a step towards reconciliation, see Ta-Nahisi Coates’ [ground-breaking Atlantic Monthly article](#) from 2014.¹⁰

⁷ <https://livingchurch.org/2020/02/17/diocese-of-texas-to-fund-13-million-in-slavery-reparations/>

⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/26/us/princeton-seminary-slavery-reparations-trnd/index.html>

⁹ <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/article/episcopalians-testify-support-slavery-reparations-bill-house-judiciary-subcommittee#:~:text=General%20Convention%20has%20passed%20resolutions%20to%20Support%20Legislation,to%20Anti-Racism%20and%20Request%20Annual%20Diocesan%20Reports%20%282009-A142%29.>

¹⁰ <https://www.theatlantic.com/projects/reparations/>

Statements Against the Resolution

Slavery ended a long time ago. While there is still racism in our society, we have made a lot of progress since the Civil War. Digging up the past will not help us move into the future. Given the economic struggle of many churches right now, this is not a good time to tackle the complicated issues of research, reparations and giving away our money.

There is already equal opportunity. We have elected a Black President and there are many successful and respected Black and Brown leaders in business, medicine, education, and in the Episcopal Church.

Implementation Requirements

The resolution calls for the establishment of a Reparations Committee, whose work would conclude with a report to Diocesan Convention 2021. No fewer than half of the members will come from communities directly affected by the legacy of slavery and genocide.

The Reparations Committee would create a “toolbox” to assist congregations and individual Episcopalians in the examination of their resources and their history.

Larger entities such as the Trustees of Donations and significantly endowed congregations may choose to engage professional researchers to conduct the work, as Christ Church, Old North has done.