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## Reparations: No Black-and-White Solution

🕒 January 28, 2020

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How should the United States of America seek reconciliation and absolution for centuries of notorious sin?

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Slavery, which systemically subjected millions of African-born and African-descended people to forced labor while denying them basic rights and liberties of personhood, has cast a long shadow on the social and cultural fabric of the country.

Even though more than 150 years have passed since the Civil War ended and human trafficking became broadly criminalized, questions remain about the substantial differences in wealth and power between white and black Americans. Though the chains were broken, the legacy of slavery continued — not just as sad memories of a wicked system, but through more modern histories of lynching, legalized discrimination, questionable urban planning practices, and mass incarceration.

Last year saw renewed interest in one long-proposed but controversial method of addressing this legacy: reparations to American descendants of enslaved African-Americans.

As previously reported in *The Living Church*, Virginia Theological Seminary and the Dioceses of Maryland, New York, and Georgia have earmarked a percentage of their endowment for reparations, recognizing their past complicity in slavery. The issue has appeared numerous times on the 2020 presidential campaign trail, with most Democratic candidates supporting newly resurfaced bill HR-40 that seeks to establish a commission to study the possibility of reparations. One candidate, Marianne Williamson, has pledged to redistribute between \$200 and \$500 billion if elected president.

Such conversations aren't limited to the United States. In Halifax, Canada — where I currently live and study — institutions and individuals are trying to understand the way their history and present connect with slavery. In 2018, the University of King's College in Halifax launched a scholarly inquiry into its own history with slavery. "Given that our university was established in 1789 and slavery existed in Nova Scotia until 1834, we want to understand our early story fully and in all its complexity," said William Lahey, president of the university. The Anglican founders of the university have not escaped the inquiry, which laid bare their personal and institutional connections to slavery.

Participants in the American conversation, at least, have yet to settle on a common definition of reparations. The narrow definition — payment to an injured party, usually between two different nations or peoples — is often bundled with broader concerns, including public memorialization of harm done; a national apology; and more truthful recounting of American history in public education and public discourse.

Judging from numerous articles in 2019 alone, many black communities feel that reparations monies would mean nothing if unaccompanied by an apology, along with a humble admission of present sins. One headline from the *Los Angeles Times* reads: "Slavery's descendants say a reparations check won't make the pain go away." Though the issue of reparations is not new — discussion began just after the Civil War — there is still no shared understanding of what reparations would do, how they would be executed, and what it would mean for relations between blacks and whites.

A key to understanding the call for reparations is the fact that those who have owned the rights to capital for long periods of time (generally white people) will tend to be richer and better off than those who did not (including most black people).

Duke University reparations economist William Darity has produced straightforward scholarship on a possible model for reparations, based on calculations of the wealth differential. These are variously derived from assessing the inequalities created by two pillars of injustice during the Jim Crow era: the theft of black-owned property and the systematic subjection of black people to inferior and inadequate resources (schooling, P

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housing, etc.). Darity cites an Associated Press report in his 2003 article that states there were “406 cases of black landowners who had 24 thousand acres of farms and timberland stolen from them in the first three decades of the twentieth century.”

In Darity's model, after the calculations of the differential have been made, reparations payments might be executed through some combination of: 1) a lump-sum cash transfer; 2) establishment of a trust fund to which black people may apply for grants; 3) a provision of vouchers to be used for asset-building; 4) reparations in kind (free university tuition, for example); or 5) the building of entirely new institutions to serve the needs and well-being of the black community.

The question that seems to be on everyone's mind is how to determine who is eligible to receive reparations payments. Darity suggests requiring recipients to document proof of slave ancestry and to demonstration having filed as “African American” on governmental forms for at least 10 years prior. A biracial person would have to prove these things for a grandparent.

These suggested eligibility requirements are contested and would probably cause bitter disputes. Gathering official records and documents would be a daunting task, even for me as a non-black person. A single mother or father working three poverty-wage jobs would no doubt find the task nearly impossible.

Darity believes that the lump-sum option would end up profiting white-owned businesses in the long term, because most funds would be spent buying goods and services provided outside the black community. He also thinks that reparations in kind, like free access to higher education, would do little to decrease the wealth differential, which is really caused by the ownership of capital over time. Darity says: “It's those intergenerational transfers — which are not merit-based, they're affectional and familial based — that set up sustained racial inequality and wealth. That's not bridged by getting more education.”

Even if economists find a reparations plan that can appropriately navigate the complex relational matrix of economic factors, the theoretical models presume an inaccurate social model. Black and white people aren't really two discrete populations, but compatriots who have shared blood and culture for generations. Though the evidence of racial segregation can be seen all around us, blacks and whites do not form two different nations. A cash transfer might serve to increase the social separation between the races, rather than help cure it.

Fear of division explains the position of Bernie Sanders, for example, who supports programs aimed at helping minorities and the disadvantaged, but rejects reparations. Perhaps at play here too, is the recognition that money alone cannot create reconciliation between social groups. Though proponents of reparations are correct in saying that the United States has a debt to pay, reparations money, narrowly conceived, may not achieve proponents' social goals.

Pay the reparations, and we might divide the nation. Do not pay, and continue to subject black lives to the relentless struggle of trying to establish familial and social stability, and equality with whites, without the material means necessary to do so.

What does this mean for our home-grown church efforts to take on the burden of reparations? The Diocese of Maryland engages in interpersonal projects like their Trail of Souls, which leads people on tours of Episcopal churches in Maryland that have ties to slavery. They also granted 10 percent of their unrestricted investment funds to the diocesan chapter of the Union of Black Episcopalians and set up a scholarship program. Projects like these may not meet the narrow definition of reparations, but these initiatives may be the best way forward, for two really important reasons.

First, the church is uniquely placed to meet the desperate need for speaking the truth about the staggering harm done by racism, drawing on its deep experience with confession, humility, forgiveness and justice. Learning to talk this way will provide momentum to a social dynamism that could veer toward reconciliation.

Second, if our nation's black people are willing to keep walking with us white people on this difficult path toward reconciliation — to be one nation, together — it may only come about within small communities like parishes, who are uniquely placed to initiate and steward communal, coalition-building projects. Indeed, it may even be possible for churches to start thinking about how they can manipulate the capital they already own, or take on new capital, and put it to the service of black people. The “repair” part of reparations may only come about when the two groups engage in collective projects together, tied to real, material resources, that are put to use for the express purpose of the betterment of black people, their children, and their children's children.

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