

REPARATIONS COMMISSION ON SLAVERY

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

THE PRESENT

What do you mean when you refer to “reparations”?

Since its founding, the Reparations Commission has adopted this working definition of “reparations” to describe the work we are doing together:

*Reparations is the process to remember, repair, restore, reconcile and make amends for wrongs that can never be singularly reducible to monetary terms. The process of reparations is “an historical reckoning involving acknowledgement that an offense against humanity was committed and that the victims have not received justice.”**

*Passage in quotes offered by Bernice Powell Jackson, Executive Minister for Justice Ministry, The United Church of Christ.

The Reparations Commission does not see “reparations” as simply a discussion about finances, although that can be part of it. We stress that reparations cannot be properly addressed until the truth has been told in all its fullness, the pain and loss has been lamented and justice is sought.

What is the “apology service” and what will happen during the service?

The “apology service” will take place on Saturday, March 25th, 2023, 12 noon – 2 pm Eastern at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The service will be celebrated by the Bishop Diocesan of New York, The Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche, with the participation of the people of the Diocese of New York and the support of the Reparations Commission on Slavery. March 25th is a significant date in that it is recognized as the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

As a feast day, we will commemorate the Feast of the Annunciation. This is the day that the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to Jesus Christ. From this event, we as Christians learn to be prepared to be used by God in amazing ways; to put our faith in the Lord, and to live life in the service of God. Such tenets are befitting for a Service of Apology for the Slavery and its legacies.

Why is it necessary to have an apology by the Bishop of New York? Why now?

While this will not be the first apology made by Episcopal religious leaders in the Episcopal Diocese of New York (see, for example, Bishop Catherine Roskam’s personal apology in 2008), this is the first apology, to our knowledge, made by the Bishop Diocesan of the Diocese of New York. It is also a means to respond to the three churchwide General Convention Resolutions of 2006 calling on dioceses to respond to the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its aftermath of segregation and discrimination, and symbolizes the episcopal authority invested in this apology on behalf of the people of the Diocese of New York.

Why does this Bishop have to make an apology?

Since 2006, the Diocese of New York has been taking part in the churchwide process of racial reconciliation led by its Social Concerns Commission and by the establishment of the Reparations Committee, and in response to three General Convention resolutions presented at the 75th Diocesan Convention, calling on dioceses to critically examine the church’s culpability in the Transatlantic slave trade and its aftermath.

In 2017, the Reparations Commission approached Bishop Dietsche about making an apology on behalf of the Diocese. The Bishop felt it was important to have a wider backing by the people of the Diocese, and recommended that the Reparations Committee (as it was known then) develop its grassroots work to gain the support of a wider group within the Diocese. In response, the Committee launched its three-year plan of Lamentation – Apology – Reparations in 2018. Along the way, many more people were educated and became aware of the role and complicity of the Diocese – its individuals, parishes, seminaries and diocesan institutions – in the transatlantic slave trade.

Several years after the launch of its plan for Lamentation – Apology – Reparations, having seen more support from the people of the Diocese in anti-racism and reparations activities, and with Bishop Dietsche scheduled to retire in 2024 from his position as Bishop Diocesan, it felt right for both the Reparations Commission and the Bishop to return to this request and see the Diocese through to the place of formal apology, so that the work of reparations, already begun, could continue to deepen even as we continue to pursue the holy work – never done – of lamentation and apology.

Who else is doing this work within faith-based communities?

Racial reconciliation and reparations processes to document, acknowledge and make amends for the historic transatlantic slave trade and its modern day consequences are taking place in many faith-based communities, and both Christian and interfaith denominations and religious confessions.

What's in it for me?

A sacred opportunity to participate directly, to confess our collective sins and seek forgiveness from each other, in a solemn, historic moment of healing, reconciliation and repair in our common life in the Diocese of New York.

How is this a part of your faith-based, daily lived experience and not just some prayers or a one-off announcement? How does this get implemented into the structure of the church's work?

The apology that we seek is two-fold, *Institutional* and *Personal*. Guilty of corporate sin, In order for the church to move forward with faith, the church must foremost put its sin behind, and that can only occur through *Institutional* apology. Likewise, the need for *Personal* apology stems from our personal sins in relationship to slavery for which we are called to apologize. Perhaps the greatest thing that we can individually apologize for is our desire not to know about it.

What are you actually doing to change the hearts of people in the Diocese of New York? Is this a model for other faith-based communities across the country?

When we have presented evidence of the ongoing effects today of past slavery yet choose to say, “That was then; it means nothing today,” we choose the sin of refusing to connect the dots. When we decide not to teach our children about the truth of slavery – the past and present effects on people within our society – we choose to perpetuate those effects into the future. To that end, we are helping people of the Diocese take incremental steps that help to 1) Name the sin, 2) Own one's part in it by accepting the responsibility, 3) Express remorse for the sin and one's role and for the harm it did, 4) Make amends in which we help to repair the damage to the extent possible, and 5) Commit to living and doing differently so that it doesn't happen again. We change hearts and minds by doing honest and hard work.

What resources are being developed around this work?

Within the Diocese of New York, the Reparations Commission has developed multiple resources over the years which are included on the [Episcopal Diocese of New York's webpage](#) and the [Reparations Commission's website](#). These include workshops and webinars, bibliographies and book lists, sermons and liturgical toolkits, and more.

Is this a healing event? A reckoning? Are we expecting to go out as healed and renewed evangelists into the world?

This is one of many efforts to move the Episcopal Diocese of New York toward racial repair and healing. It is our commitment guided by God's love to seek out justice and lasting collective and individual change. The work is on-going, centered by the principles of truth, integrity, justice and, ultimately, transformation. The healing and reckoning is not possible without adapting and living into these principles, in order to repair the breach that started with slavery and the dehumanization of people of African heritage. The harm and pain persevere, but now is the time to make a concerted effort to make amends. In doing so, we hope to be set forth as a people, forgiven, healed and unified and renewed. And though healing doesn't make us whole – it does reconnect us with the feeling of being whole again.

If Jesus died for our sins, hasn't this been taken care of already?

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is our Redeemer, God incarnate who descended to live among us, was crucified once and for all for our collective sins, was resurrected and sits at the right hand of God in glory. While it is true that Jesus has already done the act of saving us, we are still called upon to confess our sins to God, seek God's forgiveness, and reconcile with our neighbor. So, it is always appropriate to move towards humility, self-examination, confession and restoration in our walk with God and our neighbor.

Commented [1]: I'd love it if a priest with proper theological training could just double check this attempt to explain...thanks.

Commented [2]: okay -- i'll ask Allison, Trevor, Richard or Chuck to have a look

Why and how do Episcopalians engage with reparations in the Diocese of New York?

In fall 2022, the delegates of the 245th Convention of The Episcopal Diocese of New York authorized the establishment of a new corporation for the purpose of holding the corpus of funds received and identified for the purpose of reparations for the enslavement of African Americans and its aftermath. In studying optimal criteria for the Reparations Fund, the diocesan Reparations Commission discussed at length many approaches and strategies being pursued by parishes, other dioceses, and similar organizations. It engaged in deep, prayerful deliberations on the importance of this work and unanimously agreed that in order to achieve its mandate a 501(c)(3) organization should be established. In addition to establishing this organization for the allocation of funds as a grant making body, EDNY sponsors workshops, film screenings, book discussions, pilgrimages, teach-ins and more, to create meaningful dialogue and understanding of race, racism, and pathways to apology and reparations.

How are you inviting the secular community in this conversation and space?

The secular community is invited to join us on this journey to teach and to learn how we can be in responsible, caring and loving community with one another. Our programs are open to all who seek to engage in this intentional work towards breaking down the barriers that divide us. Moreover, once the fund is in operation, interested parties – organizations and individuals who have a like-minded desire to advance the purpose of justice and equity – are invited to make financial contributions.

How are you involving actual descendants of African enslaved people in this process?

By centering the descendant community in conversations to guide the processes of apology and reparations, we're reaching out, and listening to what the needs are in their communities, rather than imposing our views, understandings and will upon them. We are also working in collaboration with our newly formed credit union, and to help combat environmental racism, integrating the descendant community in the efforts of creation care.

THE LEGACY

How have we arrived at this point?

As the story of the church's entanglement in the Transatlantic practice of enslaving and profiting off the free labor of African people continues to unfold, the moment has come for the EDNY, and the Church in general to lament, repent and take intentional action for restorative justice. Much of this work begins with acknowledging the transgression, owning it, claiming it, processing the what and why, and working towards a heartfelt apology. We can't expect forgiveness simply because of this gesture, but we can continue to explore the role of the church's complicity to gain a richer understanding – through strength, truth and integrity – to bolster the trust and faithfulness of our God of justice.

Why do we need to dredge up the past?

Oppression, power, the legacies of slavery are present in contemporary life – through systems and in our institutions. The vestiges of slavery – the inequities and injustices – appear in the forms of housing, education, healthcare, labor and economic disparities, law enforcement and in our criminal justice systems. History sets the context for the present, which makes this question challenging for many people who find it difficult to connect past events to the present, and see cause and effect. For some people, it is easiest to try to forget or ignore the sins and mistakes of the past. For others, especially those whose ancestors were harmed, or who suffer the modern consequences of the sins of slavery and racism, it is impossible to move forward and heal without first addressing the past.

THE FUTURE

What does this mean for our Diocese, its parishes and people?

A radically different response to harm, indifference, and dehumanization. This is a chance to create and develop relationships for the first time, and repair broken relationships, in the family of God's people. Such engagement and commitment can lead to forgiveness and a chance to restore our souls.

What are the financial implications of this apology (financial, educational, social, systems disruption, memory, diversity in recruitment, resistance, etc.)? How will this affect the power dynamics in our Diocese?

This apology should open up dialogue that will slowly develop new relationships across broad cross-sections of African American communities, impacted by the complex legacies of slavery – the abuses that have and continue to harm individuals, and our society at large. The apology will lead to a place of wealth distribution which is long overdue. Reparations have always been made to the church, state and individual property owners, when the enslaved or formerly enslaved were manumitted, or in many instances – stole themselves away from their oppressors, however compensation was never extended to these so-called "bondsmen/women" nor to their descendants.

Complex political dynamics within this or any institution attempting to bring about transformative change lie behind the framing of reparative responses to these injustices, and efforts to right the wrongs. Slow, deliberative action to gain systems-wide buy-in has helped to propel this initiative to bring about the change. Of course, not everyone is on board; however continued exposure, dialogue and interaction with advocates invested in the reparative processes, may increase the range and measures of supporters.

Will this work continue with the new Bishop? What is the commitment to this work after Bishop Andy's apology? Will the work be ongoing?

The apology and reparations work is expected to continue under the new leadership. The assurances from the transition team include developing the work of the diocese through a reparations lens. That means any work to be implemented by the diocese will involve thinking about the challenges reparations are trying to solve. Applying a reparations lens to corporate and individual strategies and approaches to act, give, pray, research, etc. – will be executed to help change the dominant narrative. Working strategically will address the who, what and how to keep the reparations lens in sharp focus and will help with decision making, garner support, and advocacy for critical restorative action. New practices of shifting authority, empowerment and agency by ceding power and centering those directly impacted by

past harms and continued injustices can lead to resilient communities, shared economic, cultural and social growth.

Is this the end of the road?

The work of apology is never ending. There will always be moments to lament, apologize and to seek and offer reparations. Four hundred plus years of the church's complicity with enslavement will not vanish in a brush stroke. Commitment and contrite hearts, turned towards God seeking forgiveness, healing, relationships and restoration, will help to carry us through.

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