

Taking Responsibility for Reparations:
A Call to Action for Non-Black People of Faith

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Introduction

On Juneteenth, 2019, I sat at my computer, plugged into a Facebook live-stream of the Congressional hearing on H.R. 40, a bill to establish a commission to study reparations. Ta-Nehisi Coates, best known for his groundbreaking essay “The Case for Reparations,” was the first to speak. Coates’ opening statement was a direct response to the comments of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who just the day before made the remark that “none of us currently living are responsible” for what he called America’s “original sin.”¹ In his succinct style, grounded in history, Coates brought us through the various policies and practices of the US government designed to replicate and perpetuate the social control and economic disenfranchisement of slavery, during decades that McConnell had lived through and actively participated in. “Victims of that plunder are very much alive today...What they know, what this committee must know, is that while emancipation dead-bolted the door against the bandits of America, Jim Crow wedged the windows wide open. And that is the thing about Senator McConnell’s ‘something’: It was 150 years ago. And it was right now.”²

Watching him read his five minutes of prepared remarks, I knew I was witnessing a historic moment in the long journey of racial justice in the United States, and one that will shape how reparations is understood and debated in my generation and for years to come. Coates and

¹ Ted Barrett, "McConnell Opposes Paying Reparations: 'None of Us Currently Living Are Responsible' for Slavery," CNN, June 20, 2019, accessed August 18, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/18/politics/mitch-mcconnell-opposes-reparations-slavery/index.html>.

² Madeleine Carlisle and Olivia Paschal, "Read Ta-Nehisi Coates's Testimony on Reparations," The Atlantic, June 19, 2019, , accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/06/ta-nehisi-coates-testimony-house-reparations-hr-40/592042/>.

the hearing's other esteemed speakers punctuated a political and moral moment in which multiple presidential contenders are signaling their support for reparations while the country remains starkly divided along ideological and racial lines on the matter.³ It also raised serious questions that are relevant beyond the walls of Congress: who is responsible for reparations for slavery in the United States? What is standing in the way of this country doing what Black people have been asking for, calling for, demanding, since before slavery ended? When we use the term "reparations," what exactly do we mean? And what is the role of non-Black people of faith, and specifically those who worship in predominantly white contexts, in advancing the moral case for reparations? What is at stake, in a moral and spiritual sense, if we do not respond?

Social Location, Scope and Purpose

I come to the conversation about reparations with a personal commitment to the church, to racial justice, and to asking big questions about the world and my role in it. I find it important to identify my social location early on in this work, because the particularity of my existence and experiences matter. My faith has been shaped by the gospel call to build the Beloved Community through building bridges and calling out structural injustice and oppression in all its forms. I have been deeply shaped by the social justice activism and liberation theology of progressive Roman Catholics, including Jesuits and radical nuns in Central America. By heritage and by choice, I am a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which is the whitest denomination in America. As a mixed-race Korean American, I find myself in the 4%

³ Reparations is not on the radar as an issue among most white US Americans. Polling indicates that support for reparations among whites is around 4%, while 67% of Blacks say reparations are due. Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 194.

within the denomination who identifies as a person of color. My inquiry into reparations and the role of people within non-Black communities of faith⁴ is a deeply personal one, because it is in that context where I find myself both situated and challenged.⁵

Born and raised in Minnesota, my racially diverse upbringing in a majority-white state formed my ideas about belonging and justice. I have always considered race beyond a Black-white paradigm, being attuned to shades of grey from living in the “in-between.” I know that due to my Asian-mixed-with-white privilege, I experience racism and racial injustice very differently at the individual, systemic and structural levels than Black and brown people. Through experiences in faith-based community organizing, living in Washington, DC, working nationally with people from various racial and geographic contexts, and doing a whole lot of listening, I began to understand how anti-Blackness pervades all of the racialized landscape of the Americas. I agree with author Scot Nakagawa, who states that anti-Black racism is the fulcrum of white supremacy.⁶ Non-Black people of color, like me, are not in the middle of some sort of neutral zone. We benefit in material ways from the structure of an economy based on slavery. Anti-Blackness, which operates at all levels and structures of our society, is the power which fuels our white supremacist society. With liberation theology as my context, I line up with the reasoning that until Black people are free, none of us can be free.

⁴ While imperfect, I use the term “non-Black” as a way to decenter whiteness in this paper as well as to implicate those who do not claim whiteness as an identity and yet still derive benefits from the structures of white supremacy.

⁵ I bring up the whiteness of the ELCA not to focus attention on racial separation in churches as problematic, nor to suggest that the denomination’s goal should be focused on becoming more racially diverse. I bring it up because of the unjust concentration of power that resides within nearly all-white institutions. It is also central to my experience of the issues around race, racism and reparations that I have been embedded in a culturally white worship context, and thus feel I can speak from the inside of the institution regarding potential solutions forward for congregations in similar situations to the denomination in which I belong.

⁶ Scott Nakagawa, "Anti-Black Racism Is Still the Fulcrum of White Supremacy," Race Files, December 15, 2016, , accessed August 10, 2019, <https://www.racefiles.com/2016/12/15/10425/>.

I feel a deep sense of personal and moral responsibility to the process of reparations and identifying what my role is in this work. One reason for this sentiment is that I currently work in the field of philanthropy, where wealth, whiteness and power are concentrated in ways I am still trying to understand. These advantages are byproducts of a society that allows the rich to amass more wealth than they can ever spend, while sheltering a portion of their money to be used for “charitable purposes” into foundations without being taxed. In my work of social justice philanthropy, it is common to hear colleagues claim our work as acts of reparations. However, I bristle every time I hear that phrase. It does not seem consistent to me that those who earned money off of stolen land and labor can declare their actions as reparations without explicit acknowledgement from those who have been harmed, while still retaining control of how the resources are distributed, usually in the form of grants. While social justice philanthropy retains core principles that are in alignment with principles of reparations like addressing root causes of injustice and trusting the leadership of those most directly affected, the thing that philanthropy does not do is transfer power. The idea for this project came from my unsettled feelings of seeing this play out in philanthropy, while knowing that the same dynamics often occur in faith communities. I want to put these spheres in conversation with one another as I explore what it means to be faithful with the access I have and insistent on justice in the places where I can move people from dialogue to action.

I want to invite others to journey along with me in the process of discovering what our roles and responsibilities to reparations might look like. In this paper, I’ve specifically chosen to write this to non-Black people who are looking for ways to advance racial and economic justice in their local faith contexts. I will not focus on convincing the general public that reparations are

needed or important, nor on the various policies or procedures required to enact them. Deep scholarship and actionable proposals by African American sociologists, economists, scholars and leaders exist (and have existed for many years) and are easily searchable. For non-Black people of faith, I believe we need to begin from the perspective that reparations are owed specifically to Black people in America for the egregious harms of the institution of slavery and its impacts, full stop, and that it is the work of predominately white communities of faith to bring other non-Black people along with us.⁷ People of faith have an important role to play in leading a movement toward reparations and healing in the US, and the time for action is now. By bringing my own thought process and perspective to the conversation, merging the economic, moral and spiritual implications of reparations, I hope my readers will be inspired to investigate their own relationship to the topic of reparations and consider ways to take responsibility and enact justice in this important moment.

The Racial Wealth Divide and Reparations

What is reparations? Reparations is a term used in reference to the movement seeking redress from slavery, stretching as far back as 1783.⁸ The Fellowship of Reconciliation, one of the oldest social justice organizations in America, names that Black Americans and descendants of former slaves should receive reparations for “segregation and the discrimination that has led to current racial wealth inequalities, over-criminalization, and continued attacks rooted in

⁷ For the scope of this project, I am choosing to focus on reparations for Black Americans, drawing on recent scholarship and the current public debate that centers on this solution as a response to the legacy of slavery. I equally believe that reparations are owed to Native Americans in specific and particular ways such as land return and cultural sovereignty.

⁸ The first successful attempt to petition for reparations was made by Belinda Royall, a freedwoman in Massachusetts. She called the state legislature to compensate for her fifty years of enslavement and was awarded a pension from her slaveholder’s estate. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 176.

systematic white supremacy.”⁹ They promote “a call to repair that supports a culture of accountability, where healing and repair of moral and material harms rooted in the Transatlantic Slave Trade are urgent matters for spirituality, justice and peace.”¹⁰ Past collective efforts and recent scholarship, including that of Coates and ethicist Dr. Jennifer Harvey, point to a vision that includes and values the economic, moral and spiritual dimensions of reparations.

In his seminal piece, Coates acknowledges and moves beyond the history of slavery as the primary evidence for his case for reparations. Coates pushes us forward by naming specific ways that policies and practices, from post-Civil War to the present, were created to mimic the social control of slavery and prevented Black people from gaining access to land or means of production. This includes, but is certainly not limited to: Jim Crow era policies, mass incarceration, predatory lending, land seizures from sharecroppers in the south and restrictive covenants on housing in the north. Black people were steered into ghettos, given the worst jobs with terrible wages, brutalized by police, denied access to capital, and then blamed for their conditions. He goes in depth to describe the plight of the Contract Buyer’s League of Chicago, a group of Black homeowners who bought their homes through a predatory contract-for-deed scam orchestrated by white property owners in the 1960s. These folks organized to end the cycle of their misery. At the time, 85% of Black homeowners in Chicago purchased homes on contract due to their lack of access to legitimate forms of credit, and many were scammed out of their savings and homes in the process. Once they collectively identified the problem, they fought back and insisted on reparations that included three components: 1) charging society with a

⁹ This definition is in the FOR Night of a Thousand Conversations toolkit, page 2.

¹⁰ Ibid, p 1.

crime against their community, 2) wanting public acknowledgement of the wrong done to them, and 3) restitution for injury.

The Contract Buyer's League (hereafter CBL) demands are an example of how the approach to reparations is a multifaceted process, not an end destination. They emphasize public and societal acknowledgement of the specific crimes perpetrated against them. This specificity moves us beyond slavery as the singular injury and allows us to name particular institutions and individuals in society who played a part in the ongoing harm. In the case of the CBL, this included contract sellers, real estate speculators, loan officers and lawyers who acted "willfully and maliciously."¹¹ The CBL took their case to court as a demand for on-the-record public acknowledgement, to unveil the reality of the situation and to have the guilty party (which was the state for its failure to regulate and protect consumers) admit wrongdoing. Being seen and validated is important, and naming the harm visibilizes the harm so often denied or negated throughout history. By addressing the harm head on, not skipping it over, we focus on what actually happened and it's true impact instead of jumping to solutions or problem-solving.

The third demand of the CBL, restitution for injury, lines up with what many know as reparations. Compensation through direct payment for material losses has always been instrumental to reparations. As one student from Union Theological Seminary so clearly stated, "Reparations are not a guilt offering or stewardship... reparations are a simple call to begin paying back what has been stolen, what is justly owned to those stolen from."¹² This is often where the majority of attention is paid in the public debate on reparations and the source of most resistance. An example of the call for restitution is the Black Manifesto, a document published

¹¹ Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, 172.

¹² Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 144.

by the Black Economic Development Conference in 1969. It demanded \$500 million dollars, or \$15 for every Black person in America, as a starting figure to be paid by white churches and Jewish synagogues to Black-led economic development projects.¹³ Attaching dollar amounts to the generational harm caused by the white power structure in the US is an essential part of the economic redress demanded within any call for reparations.

Reparations are not a one-time transaction. Such an approach would be insufficient, akin to a charitable payment or a buy-out. Calls from reparations advocates to include a transfer of wealth or means of production demonstrate that reparations can be part of the solution to addressing the racial wealth divide. Wealth and income inequality between whites and Blacks in America is a result of historical practices and policies designed to enrich those at the top of the racial hierarchy and prevent Black people from gaining economic security through wealth accumulation. At the time of Emancipation Proclamation in 1865, African Americans owned 0.5% of the wealth in this country. In 1990, they owned only 1% of the nation's wealth.¹⁴ For every \$100 white families hold in 2019, Black families hold \$5.¹⁵ One in 4 Black households have negative wealth, compared to 1 in 10 white households. The evidence is clear: Blacks and whites have never been on level playing ground when it comes to economic security, and the gap continues to widen and worsen. Black wealth declined 75% between 1983 and 2013, while white household wealth increased 14% in the same time period. If current trends continue, by 2053,

¹³ This amount was never paid and caused panic and resistance among the denominations called to account. For a detailed account of the speech delivered by James Forbes at Riverside Church, see Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, chapter 4.

¹⁴ Dalton Conley, *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth and Social Policy in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 25.

¹⁵ Ibram X. Kendi, "There Is No Middle Ground on Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 19, 2019, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/ibram-x-kendi-opposing-reparations-racist/592060/>.

median Black household wealth will be at 0 by 2053, which is well within my lifetime. Given this reality, author Ibram X. Kendi implores, “how can we close the racial wealth gap without reparations?” As Harvey states, race is a “profoundly material relationship,”¹⁶ and reparations is a strategy for addressing the material imbalance. The United States government has never materially or financially compensated individuals or communities for the injustices they’ve endured through stolen labor and outright financial discrimination in a widespread or systematic way. Transferring the means of production by providing tools and access to wealth-building has the potential to transform the current power structure toward a multi-generational strategy to narrow this divide and build economic and political power among Black people.

While there are many dimensions to the term, Jennifer Harvey states that, “most reparations advocates endorse reparations in forms designed to restructure society, redistribute wealth, and build economic and political power among Blacks.” However, I believe the current discourse around reparations is anemic if the conversation is based on material wealth alone. I agree with Coates in his call to move us beyond what’s comfortable into territory that has the power to transform our nation, and ourselves in the process: “Reparations — by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences — is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely... What I’m talking about is more than recompense for past injustices — more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I’m talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.”¹⁷

The Moral Case for Reparations

¹⁶ Jennifer Harvey, "White Protestants and Black Christians: The Absence and Presence of Whiteness in the Face of the Black Manifesto," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39, no. 1 (2011): accessed June 6, 2019, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9795.2010.00459.x.

¹⁷ Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, 202.

Reparations are more than a realignment of economic relationships. It is a launching point for reckoning that requires examination of history and of conscience, repentance and action. It is a process we must undertake to “see ourselves squarely.” Faith and spiritual communities committed to racial justice and reconciliation have a moral responsibility to engage in reparations. For Christians, it is at the heart of our identity to be practitioners of justice and right relationships in community. Reparations is not a theoretical exercise or political agenda item; it is a requirement for those who claim to be repairers of the breach, laborers of a kingdom yet to come, and faithful disciples of the God of justice, truth, and liberation. A morally responsible approach to reparations includes the duty to acknowledge past harm, repentance, and collective action toward repair.

First, there is a moral duty for non-Black Christians in predominantly white faith institutions to face history directly and to acknowledge the truth of their past. Jennifer Harvey, in “Dear White Christians,” presents the idea of a reparations paradigm as a way to uncover these truths. “A reparations paradigm continues to be the necessary and appropriate way for Christians, especially white Christians, to understand and respond to race the US generally and in our faith communities specifically.” A reparations paradigm supports our understanding of race in ways that center history, how racial identities emerged from that history, and the structural dimensions of our relationships across lines of difference.¹⁸ It requires facing the actions of ancestors, and understanding how race shaped their destinies in powerful ways. It could also include the airing of denominational family secrets and exposing that which has been hidden to the benefit of

¹⁸ Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 4.

people seeking to maintain power. Bringing our full church histories to light is part of the important work of non-Black Christians in the process of reparations.

One example of this truth-telling is to be honest about how white Christians' views are skewed regarding their involvement in the Civil Rights movement, as seen through Harvey's in-depth examination of the white church's response to the Black Manifesto. This prophetic public document charged white churches and Jewish synagogues as complicit in upholding the institution of slavery and exploitation of Black people in America. What should be more scandalous than Forbes' disruption of a worship service was the response (or lack of response) from denominations.¹⁹ Many faith institutions (especially mainline protestant bodies like the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church) saw themselves as allies in the struggle for civil rights, whose leaders and members marched alongside Dr. King in Selma and in the March on Washington. While it is reported that some \$127 million was "shaken loose" by the Manifesto,²⁰ their overall demands were not met and churches did not embrace the direct call for reparations. Those who did respond chose to do so in their own ways. Some denominations directed funds to competing groups or had their own Black bishops and leadership make decisions about where to direct funds. Others put additional resources into existing anti-poverty programs, ignoring the specific request for funding to create a National Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund, a National Welfare Rights Organization, a southern land bank, and alternative publishing and printing

¹⁹ For a full account of the actions of white protestant congregations in response to the Black manifesto, see: Harvey, "White Protestants and Black Christians: The Absence and Presence of Whiteness in the Face of the Black Manifesto."

²⁰ Thomas A. Johnson, "Blacks Press Reparations Demands," New York Times, June 10, 1970, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1970/06/10/81843686.html?pageNumber=49>.

houses.²¹ As Harvey states, “white Protestants repeatedly did precisely what their Black colleagues demanded they do not do, and refused to do what their Black colleagues demanded they do.”²² This response constitutes a moral failure on the part of church bodies who proclaimed to be on the side of justice and the oppressed and whose actions demonstrated their preference for maintaining power and control. It also signaled to Black people the limits of white solidarity in the context of the Civil Rights movement. Disappointment and mistrust are byproducts of white churches’ inaction and absence from the cause.

As a mainline Protestant Christian engaging in a study around reparations, I was incredibly ignorant of this particular chapter in US church history. I knew about the marches where white and Black Christians stood side-by-side confronting segregation in the South, but nothing of what followed when economic demands were made of them. While I’d heard the term “Black Manifesto” before, I was surprised to learn how the backlash against Forbes’ speech was mostly focused on how it transpired. Their justifications for dismissing the Manifesto sound eerily similar to responses I’ve heard regarding present-day disruptions by the Movement for Black Lives meant to bring public attention to injustice. “It’s not appropriate to disrupt a worship service.” “Their solutions aren’t effective.” “He was too angry.” “Maybe they’d get more support if they weren’t so confrontational.” When directly charged with their past actions and harm, these white people of faith did not take it well. They took issue with the supposed indecency and impropriety of Black tactics rather than their own complicity in the white-dominated power structure. It is incumbent on people of faith to examine themselves first as to why this dynamic continues to repeat itself. What truths might non-Black Christians be ignorant of based on their

²¹ <https://snccdigital.org/events/jim-forman-delivers-Black-manifesto-at-riverside-church/>

²² Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 126.

own social location and history? If white Christians, out of fragility or guilt or moral paralysis, continue to resist the truth and solutions offered to them time and again, is reconciliation even possible? Whether we are remembering the past or learning it for the first time, acknowledging a complete picture of the history of racial injustice and complicity in it is an important step in accepting collective responsibility and moving toward repentance.

The concept of repentance is deeply connected to the Christian faith tradition and to the process of reparations. Repentance goes beyond an acknowledgement of guilt or sin. It is a confession of wrongdoing *and* a commitment to turn away from the ways of the past. It involves word and deed, breaking the cycle of injustice by stating a specific harm and committing to not repeating it. With repentance, we enter deeper into relational territory, knowing that in order to heal or reconcile or “square up,” we cannot reduce the effort to monetary terms alone.

With the term repentance comes the concept of sin. While this theological language and framing may be fraught for some, it can be useful for white Christians and those who have benefited from a white-dominant power structure to see repentance and reparations as appropriate responses to social sin. The New York Times columnist and writer David Brooks recently wrote a piece on his conversion experience from critic to proponent of reparations by naming sin as the source of racial division, and that sin is anything that assaults the moral order. “Slavery doesn’t merely cause pain and suffering to the slave. It is a corruption that infects the whole society.”²³ He also names that unaddressed sin, not unlike trauma, travels down through time and generations. Consequently, those who are living today and benefitting from a racist society must bear some responsibility for the moral injury caused by the actions or inactions of

²³ David Brooks, "The Case for Reparations," *New York Times*, March 7, 2019, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/07/opinion/case-for-reparations.html>.

our ancestors. Brooks closes his piece with a plea to a fractured nation, to address the “original sin that hardens the heart, separates Americans from one another and serves as model and fuel for other injustices.” In other words, racial injustice is *the* central issue in this country, placing responsibility on American non-Black Christians to repent by turning away and choosing another direction.

Theologian Keri Day offers an analysis of how Jesus may have responded to reparations through the example of his encounter with a tax collector in Luke 19. Zaccheus was a well-known sinner who routinely took advantage of the system and the poor for his own financial gain. When Jesus saw him perched in a tree, he called to him. Surely, Jesus would have known this man’s past transgressions. His outreach was a controversial act. And yet, Jesus knew and called Zaccheus by name, commanding him to come down and receive him at his home. In response, Zaccheus scurried down the tree and announced: “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”²⁴ Jesus then declared that salvation had come to Zaccheus’ house that day. According to Day, when Zaccheus gave back what he stole, he could be reconciled with others and God. Central to God’s view of a just economy is “restitution and repair as grounds for God’s salvific work in history... not merely in the existential but it is also in the material.”²⁵ The story reminds us that Jesus recognized and honored Zaccheus’ act of repentance, both the words and deeds, which included redistributing wealth and making amends fourfold.

²⁴ Luke 19:9, NRSV.

²⁵ "Theologian Makes Biblical Case for Why White Christians Need to Support Reparations for Black Americans," The Christian Post, May 17, 2019, accessed August 19, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/theologian-makes-biblical-case-for-why-white-christians-need-to-support-reparations-for-Black-americans.html>.

Collective action toward repair is the third component of a moral approach to reparations. Changing hearts and minds through individual awareness and repentance is important, but in order to tackle the systemic and endemic reality of the racial wealth divide, we must think about solutions that fundamentally alter conditions on a larger and deeper scale. Civil rights history shows us that progress on reparations is unlikely to occur in a top-down, politically-driven way. Indeed, social change almost always comes from the bottom-up when organized groups of people begin to act their way into new possibilities that influence those in power to do the same. Given the current racial divide on the issue of reparations, I believe it is incumbent on non-Black and non-Indigenous people of faith to get things started and begin to practice reparations in a voluntary and localized way. Our leadership may be necessary to create a space for dialogue and engagement with folks who are uninformed, skeptical or even hostile to the idea of reparations. Our privilege can be leveraged to create space for the desires and visions of people most directly affected by the injustice to be heard. And our labor is needed, because those of us who have historically benefitted from the oppression of Black people should put more effort into repairing the harm than those who have historically been exploited. We have a moral obligation to not leave the process of reparations to policymakers and political winds but to pursue justice now, at a level where it is possible to make substantial change happen.

Grassroots efforts to redistribute wealth to Black people are underway across the country. The Stolen Wealth Returns (SWR) project is an excellent example of the specificity, creativity, and collective action required to advance reparations. SWR's efforts highlight some of the practices and principles I would hope to see in any grassroots or widespread reparations effort.

The problem and solution were identified by those most directly impacted by injustice. SWR started with thirteen Black organizers who owe a combined \$1.2 million in student debt. The group consists of people from all over the US who have dedicated their lives to Black self-determination and liberation. They identified the root of their student loan problem as the racialized wealth gap. They were all socialized to view education as a ladder out of poverty, yet face crushing student loan debt that limits their ability to meet basic needs, provide for their families and continue to work in grassroots social change. Many of the organizers took out loans that were capitalized, meaning their unpaid interest was folded into the principle of the loan, ballooning the balance and verging on predatory lending. Founding member Lena Gardner shared her own vulnerability in the process of creating SWR: “What do you do when you can’t figure something out on your own? What do you do when the lie of individualism becomes disturbingly revealed in a very apparent way? You ask for help.”²⁶

Lena and other organizers reached out to people they knew who could help- mostly individual white people in the progressive faith community in Minnesota. Known as “returners” in the project, they are all deeply involved in racial justice organizing work. Returners signed on, but said they’d like to do more. Rather than loan the money interest-free, as was initially proposed, the returners wanted to employ a reparations framework by giving and raising money to pay the debts down entirely as a form of reparations.

Since the beginning of the project in late 2017, Stolen Wealth Returns has raised \$73,000 from 27 people, and has paid out \$47,000 to the 13 organizers. The larger fundraising campaign to pay off the \$1.2 million in debt is in process. According to a recent fundraising page, “We

²⁶ "Lena's Story," Stolen Wealth Returns, April 11, 2019, accessed August 18, 2019, <https://stolenwealthreturns.org/our-story/>.

continue to work with individuals and communities on a variety of strategies, ranging from major donor reparations to small group giving circles, and we are currently paying about \$6,000 a month to cover the loan payments of all the organizers in the group to keep them from going into default while we raise enough money to pay them off entirely.”²⁷ The debt relief provided by this effort was a factor in one organizer’s ability to purchase a home. The project is making a real impact right now, even as it continues to fundraise for the bulk of the resources to pay down the debts.

Organizers created and drove the narrative. From the beginning, self-determination has been central to the ethos and success of this project. Those most affected are telling their own stories, in all their complexity, in ways that are empowering and also confidential if desired. They name the systemic barriers to liberation and freedom they experience on a personal level. They see SWR as an opportunity and concrete way to make amends and affirm the humanity of Black people. It frees both organizers and returners up to have direct conversations about money and wealth. Reparations are also named as a form of spiritual healing. The project operates on the organizers’ terms, with their agency, language, autonomy, and comfort at the center of the work.

They value relationships and intentionality while recognizing the distinct work of organizers and returners. Since the project’s founding, the organizer and returner teams have met separately, with one Black organizer attending both groups. As trust has been built over time, they’ve interacted more. Organizer identities are kept private, unless they choose to be

²⁷ "Click Here to Support Stolen Wealth Returns Organized by Andrea Johnson," Gofundme.com, accessed August 18, 2019, <https://www.gofundme.com/f/stolen-wealth-returns?fbclid=IwAR0dTymJLkRoCLKNCsA-FU6MAi17GRUjCpazeL66LnmYjFr8cq1MNolIHes>.

identified as part of the project, because advertising one's debt for the purposes of raising money can feel exploitative. The organizers are engaged in a collective healing process, led by an expert facilitator in the realm of healing justice, to address the guilt, shame, and trauma related to financial struggle and debt.

The principle of anonymity pushes back against the desire that can often come from white, wealthy donors to know where their dollars are going before considering giving. By removing the charitable dynamic, this work fits into the realm of justice, which is unconcerned about the interests or preferences of donors. Returners are encouraged to be public about their contributions and to openly discuss their feelings around money with one another, which often includes guilt about having more than enough resources. It is important for white donors to be accountable to their own wealth accumulation stories in order to build cross-class and cross-racial solidarity, as well as bring other white people on board with their cause.

They recognize the limitations to their project while also looking to scale their work through replication. SWR acknowledges that this is a fraction of the work that is needed to be done in relation to reparations. They've started with a specific group of people carrying a specific kind of debt. However, the thoughtful process they've created can serve as a model for others who desire to see real progress on reparations at the grassroots level. The team is available to consult with other groups who are inspired to undertake a similar effort. They advise interested communities to take time to consider how they'll address the real feelings and interpersonal dynamics that arise when dealing with money and debt across lines of race and class. They recommend having a strong mix of skills and roles on the returner team as well as a variety of fundraising approaches and strategies.

SWR is just one example of grassroots reparations efforts in the faith community context. It stands out because it became a project in response to a pressing economic need articulated by Black leaders. It requires trust, vulnerability, and a willingness on both sides to have hard conversations and work through lots of feelings. The returners have an ongoing commitment to be partners, not simply donors. Their distinct work is to understand their own history and relationship to money so that their collective action is rooted in an ethic of justice, not charity. This group has clearly heard the moral call to act on reparations, and is doing so with a boldness of spirit that moved them to address the economic imperative for reparations in ways that are creative, relational, and healing.

Reparations from a Spiritual Perspective

2019 is a significant year in the realm of reparations. It marks five years since the Ferguson uprising after the death of Michael Brown. Fifty years have passed since the Black Manifesto was read aloud at Riverside Church, sparking controversy within denominations across the US. And 400 years ago, the first Black people were brought to the shores of the United States in chains. A hearing in the House of Representatives and a presidential primary contest are reminding us of these meaningful and painful milestones of American racial injustice. The calls for reparations from a moral imperative and economic justice standpoint have moved from a marginalized discussion topic to the center of the debate stage. Yet the dimension of spirituality has been largely overlooked in this national conversation. Our spiritual lives as individual people of faith, organized faith communities, and the country as a whole are at stake when it comes to how we respond to reparations. We can look to the wisdom of Black leaders who have long recognized the spiritual toll of racism in this country to help many of us see what we have lost,

and what we can gain, if we take reparations seriously as a spiritual practice. Addressing reparations in such a way can open pathways for healing.

What would a spiritual approach to reparations look like? It would start with an apology.

Washington Post writer Jonathan Capehart illustrates how meaningful the act could be:

“At bottom, I bet you an apology is what African Americans want most. An acknowledgment of the pain and suffering, an expression of sorrow for the mistreatment and degradation, and an “I’m sorry” for the abasement of our ancestors and the disrespect (still) endured by their descendants. No check of any amount could substitute the priceless psychological benefit of a simple and sincere apology.”²⁸

Capehart suggests that non-financial actions could be more powerful than economic repair. In addition to making things right in a fiscal sense, an act of apology must come from the heart of the nation. An apology as an official act of the US government would disrupt the pattern of passing the burdens of violence and injustice to the next generation. The “priceless psychological benefit” piece is also important to note, as the act of apology should not be centered on those who committed the injustice, but those who have been wronged or harmed. A genuine apology has the potential to ease the generational anger and trauma pent up inside the bodies and souls of people who have waited hundreds of years for justice to be served. It could clarify and validate peoples’ life experiences, knowing that their suffering was not born out of personal failure or cultural deficiency, but out of intentional acts by those in power to diminish their humanity and limit their potential. It could clear the dirt and debris from the crevices of our nation’s

²⁸ Jonathan Capehart, "No Reparations Check of Any Amount Could Substitute for an Apology," *Washington Post*, August 15, 2019, accessed August 18, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/08/15/no-reparations-check-any-amount-could-substitute-an-apology/?noredirect=on>.

consciousness. Such an act might build trust and a common starting place from which to work out the finer and tougher details of how to operationalize reparations in material ways.

The Rev. angel kyodo williams, a Zen Buddhist priest, emphasizes that inner change and outer change go hand in hand. She insists that reparations emphasize spiritual reckoning so as not to replicate existing and harmful power dynamics: “The fact of the material resourcing and the uprighting of things must be coupled with a real understanding of how it is a spiritual uprighting; otherwise, we end up capitulating to money as deity and the absolving of all things... And that is not the message that we want to send, as it reifies the paradigm, most especially because White bodied people are holding the access to the grand deity of money and we don’t want to reassert power in the form of money. So, reparations has to be something more than money.”²⁹

How might a spiritual perspective advance reparations? In general, spiritual awareness increases our individual and collective capacity to connect to something bigger than ourselves, to hold greater complexity and to be present to what is unfolding in the here and now. With spirit at the center, we become open to new and expansive ways of thinking about ourselves and the world around us. Spirituality can help us recognize and confront obstacles that keep our society from collective liberation, reconciliation, and healing.

For non-Black people, a spiritual approach can help us grieve and cope with the humanity we’ve lost as unaware or complacent participants in the dehumanization of Black lives over centuries. We can build on our capacity to recognize and hold pain related to racial injustice rather than live with denial, quick fixes, or ignorance. Grounded in spirit, those of us who are not Black are invited to shed our defensiveness and let go of reactivity when it comes to the difficult

²⁹ Fellowship USA. “Rev angel kyodo williams on Reparations and Buddhism.” *YouTube* video, 11:03. November 15, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Xcz3fYb87o>

truths named in the discussion of reparations. Taking action is part of the process of restoration for victimizers and perpetrators, which is also part of a robust spiritual approach. Contemplation and action go together, providing spiritual sustenance for the long journey. It will take hard work and the movement of the spirit for those who benefit from a white supremacist society to get closer to Dr. King's authentic vision of the Beloved Community.

For Black people, the spiritual implications of reparations open up possibilities for healing and authentic community. If reparations are done in a morally grounded and responsible way, following the leadership of Black communities, it could lead to a sense of more freedom and validation for Black people as citizens of this country. It would generate tangible economic benefits and concrete improvements in peoples' lives. Providing for one's loved ones financially and generating wealth as a means of security can have profound impacts on one's life choices, psyche, and soul. In grassroots reparations processes, Black participants build power and agency in decision-making about where resources would go. The impact of having command over a small part of one's destiny should not be overlooked as an important component of reparations.

Reparations is a spiritual journey toward redemption and belonging, and predominantly white spiritual communities are recognizing that this work is integral to their witness on racial justice. They are taking responsibility for the way their institutions have failed and harmed. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America offered an apology to people of African descent at its most recent churchwide assembly "for its historical complicity in slavery and its enduring legacy of racism in the United States and globally."³⁰ It is encouraging its congregations to undertake a

³⁰ Joyce Cadwell, "EXPLANATION OF THE DECLARATION OF THE ELCA to People of African Descent", June 2019, [https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/Slavery_Apology_Explanation.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Slavery_Apology_Explanation.pdf).

study of reparations. The Unitarian Universalist Association committed \$5.3 million dollars to Black Lives of UU “as a religious act, not a piece of corporate business,” to strengthen leadership and representation of Black Unitarian Universalists across the faith.³¹ These actions are milestones on the journey toward collective liberation and exemplify the significance of combining the moral, spiritual and economic dimensions of reparations. They represent many years of discernment, prodding, disagreement, and trust built through the process of grappling with what reparations could and should look like within the context of communities of faith. They are not the end, but rather the beginning.

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³¹Elaine McArdle, "UUA Board Commits \$5.3 Million to Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism," UU World Magazine, October 20, 2016, accessed August 18, 2019, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/board-commits-5-million-bluu>.

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