

Report of the Task Force to Study Reparations 216th General Assembly (2004)

Affirming that Jesus Christ calls us to repair wrongs done to one another and to work for personal and social reconciliation and renewal, the General Assembly Council, on behalf of the Task Force to Study Reparations, and in consultation with the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC), recommends that the 216th General Assembly (2004) take the following actions:

- 1. Encourage Presbyterians to create opportunities to tell and hear stories remembering the past and celebrating examples of repair, restoration, reconciliation, and renewal.**
- 2. Encourage congregations, governing bodies, racial ethnic caucuses, and other PC(USA) entities to create opportunities for discussion in which participants remember the past and celebrate examples of repair, restoration, reconciliation, and renewal on issues of reparations and reconciliation.**
- 3. Encourage the Ministries Divisions of the General Assembly Council and governing bodies to include workshops and worship services on reparations, reconciliation, and renewal in conferences; and report their efforts to the 217th General Assembly (2006).**
- 4. a. Commends the Belhar Confession to the church as a resource for reflection, study, and response, as a means of deepening the commitment of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to dealing with racism and a means of strengthening its unity; bearing in mind that the Belhar Confession emerged from the context of racism in South Africa;**
 - b. Requests the General Assembly Council, Office of Theology and Worship, to prepare materials to facilitate churchwide reflection and study;**
 - c. Urges each presbytery and all congregations to undertake a study of the Belhar Confession before the 218th General Assembly (2008);**
 - d. Directs the Office of the General Assembly and the General Assembly Council, Office of Theology and Worship, to receive responses, prepare a summary, and report results to the 218th General Assembly (2008), together with possible recommendations for further engagement with the Belhar Confession.**

OGA COMMENT ON ITEM 10-03, RECOMMENDATION 4

Comment on Item 10-03, Recommendation 4 □ From the Office of the General Assembly.

The Office of the General Assembly advises that Recommendation 4 of Item 10-03 be answered as follows:

“The 216th General Assembly (2004)

“1. commends the Belhar Confession to the church for reflection, study, and response, as a means of deepening the commitment of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to dealing with racism and a means of strengthening its unity;

“2. requests the Office of Theology and Worship to prepare materials to facilitate churchwide reflection and study;

“3. urges each presbytery and all congregations to undertake a study of the Belhar Confession before the 218th General Assembly (2008);

“4. directs the Office of the General Assembly and the Office of Theology and Worship to receive responses, prepare a summary, and report results to the 218th General Assembly (2008), together with possible recommendations for further engagement with the Belhar Confession.”

The OGA concurs with the General Assembly Council that, at its core, issues related to racism and reparations are theological concerns related to our confessional heritage. The 209th General Assembly (1997) approved a report on “The Assessment of Proposed Amendments to the Book of Confessions,” which makes clear that the starting point for considering historic confessions should be a serious process of study and reflection in the church. We believe that the confession (and the historical reality) that most clearly gives witness to the reconciling power of the gospel to overcome racism is the Belhar Confession rising out of the experience of Reformed Christians in South Africa and that the PC(USA) would do well to join other Reformed churches around the world in a serious study of this confession.

BELHAR CONFESSION

The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in Southern Africa. This “outcry of faith” and “call for faithfulness and repentance” was first drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) under the leadership of Allan Boesak. The DRMC took the lead in declaring that apartheid constituted a status confessionis in which the truth of the gospel was at stake.

The Dutch Reformed Mission Church formally adopted the Belhar Confession in 1986. It is now one of the “standards of unity” of the new Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA). Belhar’s theological confrontation of the sin of racism has made possible reconciliation among Reformed churches in Southern Africa and has aided the process of reconciliation within the nation.

Belhar’s relevance is not confined to Southern Africa. It addresses three key issues of concern to all churches: unity of the church and unity among all people, reconciliation within church and society, and God’s justice. Belhar is currently being studied by a number of Reformed churches, including the Reformed Church in America. As one member of the URCSA has said, “We carry this confession on behalf of all the Reformed churches. We do not think of it as ours alone.”

Confession of Belhar

September 1986 [1](#)

- 1. We believe** in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.
- 2. We believe** in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

We believe

- that Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;
- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already

conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;

- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of

Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity;

- that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;
- which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;
- which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;
- which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

3. We believe

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.
- that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;
- that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;
- that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

4. We believe

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged
- that God calls the church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;
- that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;
- that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;

- that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right;
- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology

- which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

5. We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever.

Endnote

1. This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the confession as it was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986. In 1994 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the [Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa](#) (URCSA). This inclusive language text was prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

5. Request the office of Churchwide Personnel Services, the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates, and the Committee on Theological Education to investigate whether there is cultural bias in the process of ordination to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament, and to report the results to the 217th General Assembly (2006) including recommendations for measures to correct any problems that may be found.

6. Request the Peacemaking Program, in consultation with the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns and the Racial Ethnic Ministries program Area, to design a study resource on reparations, reconciliation, and renewal that includes worship services of remembering and confessing the impacts of racism and moving toward reparation, reconciliation, and renewal, and to make it available to the church at large.

7. Request the Peacemaking Program, in consultation with the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns, the Racial Ethnic Ministries program area, and the Presbyterian Washington Office, to provide Web-based resources on issues related to reparations, reconciliation, and renewal.

8. Encourage congregations and governing bodies to support economic development and congregation-based organizing projects rooted in the Gospel that lead to repair, reconciliation, and renewal for communities violated by the sin of racism.

9. Request the General Assembly Council to create an Extra Commitment Opportunity account to fund congregationally based ministries of economic development leading to repair and renewal, and report to the 217th General Assembly (2006).

10. Request the PC(USA) Washington Office to monitor and advocate for legislation related to reparations, renewal, and reconciliation, including the bill introduced by Representative John Conyers calling for the creation of a commission to study reparations proposals for African Americans, and report their efforts to the 217th General Assembly (2006).

11. Request the PC(USA) United Nations Office to monitor and support international efforts related to reparations, renewal, and reconciliation, and report their efforts to the 217th General Assembly (2006).

12. Direct the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly to communicate with the president, the members of the United States Senate, and the members of the United States House of Representatives, urging:

a. passage of legislation calling for the creation of a commission to study reparations proposals for African Americans;

b. that the United States government acknowledge the evil of racism and its various manifestations, through a public apology and create of a memorial to Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Alaskan Natives;

c. that the United States government work to address the ongoing impacts of racism on Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Alaskan Natives in the area of income and wealth, health care, and education; and

d. That the United States government reinforce protection against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance by ensuring that all persons have access to effective and adequate remedies and enjoy the right to seek from competent national tribunals and other national institutions just and adequate reparation and satisfaction for any damages as a result of such discrimination.

13. Dismiss the Task Force to Study Reparations with thanks.

Rationale

These recommendations and report are in response to the following referral: 2001 Referral: 26.013. Response to Recommendation to Create a Task Force to Study Issues of Reparations for African Americans, Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, Asian Americans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Others Who Have Experienced Unjust Treatment; Report Findings to the 216th General Assembly (2004)—From the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (Minutes, 2001, Part I, pp. 60, 334).

I. Introduction

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26–27, NRSV)

We declare that all human beings are born free, equal in dignity and rights and have the potential to contribute constructively to the development and well-being of their societies. Any doctrine of racial superiority is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and must be rejected along with theories which attempt to determine the existence of separate human races. (Report of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, Republic of South Africa, 31 August–8 September 2001, p. 10. The report is online at www.unhcr.ch/html/racism.)

The question of whether or not the United States government should pay reparations to people on whom it has inflicted harm is being raised in America and around the globe. Books and articles from newspapers and magazines have been and are being written. Radio and television talk shows are sponsoring discussions and debates on the topic. Teachers are raising the question of reparations in classrooms at all grade levels throughout the nation. And churches are studying the propriety of developing policy statements that address the question.

The focal point of the current reparations debate in North America is African Americans. Randall Robinson's book, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, published in 2000 by Dutton Books, is primarily responsible for the focus of the current debate. Notwithstanding that fact, the practice of, and debate about, reparations has a much broader history in the United States. Indeed, the practice of paying reparations to aggrieved groups of people is long-standing.

Shortly after the Revolutionary War, Americans asked the British government for compensation for the slaves who escaped to England. The United States government paid reparations to some Native Americans for the two billion acres of land taken from them. Under the 1921 Thompson-Urrutia Treaty, the United States paid Colombia reparations for excising the territory of Panama

from Columbia for the purpose of building the Panama Canal.² The United States government worked to assure that the victims of Nazi persecution received

compensation for personal and financial losses incurred during World War II. Japanese Americans who were unjustly incarcerated after the bombing of Pearl Harbor received \$1.2 billion in reparations from the United States government in 1988 after more than twenty years of advocacy and work. In each of the examples listed here, the United States either advocated for, or paid reparations to, groups of people who in some way experienced unjust harm.

By virtue of the fact that the United States government has in some cases either advocated for or paid reparations to aggrieved peoples, it has acknowledged that there have been times in the past when it either agreed that an injustice had occurred for which the victims deserved compensation, or that the government itself had unjustly inflicted harm on certain groups of people. It is important to recognize that in each case where reparations were paid by the United States government, no individuals were deemed responsible for the harmful behavior. Rather, citizens of the United States were collectively held responsible whether or not they personally participated in the behavior that caused harm.

From a Christian perspective, reparations is not so much about assigning blame to individuals or groups of people as it is about recognizing that “we the people,” citizens of the United States, are sometimes found culpable for the harm done to others because of our government’s laws and policies and our social practices. It is for those times that we must, as a nation and as a church, repent of our sins against our sisters and brothers, diligently attempt to repair any breach in relationship that has been caused, and do our best to redress any and all injustices visited upon innocent people.

The concept of reparations provides a framework for responding to such situations. Reparation is a process of remembering, restoring, repairing, and redressing injustices for the purpose of reconciliation and human restitution. For Christians, this is a particularly appropriate ministry. Reparations involve an acknowledgement of beneficial gains at the expense of others or harm done to others and includes confession, repentance, forgiveness, and renewal.

Careful study, prayer combined with a significant amount of time spent listening to various voices within and outside of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), leads to the conviction that sins have been committed against our sisters and brothers of Native American, African American, Asian American, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Alaskan Native heritage. Presbyterians and other citizens of the United States have too frequently remained silent in the face of atrocities like the enslavement and colonization of African peoples, the destruction of First World or Native peoples, and the confiscation of lands that were already occupied by indigenous inhabitants. For example, in regard to American slavery, our Presbyterian ancestors both used Scripture to justify the enslavement of other human beings and were slaveholders themselves.

The point is not to indict any particular group of people for such atrocities. Rather, as members of the same body, the body of Christ, we must all bear equal responsibility for the sins of our past. The Scriptures call us to bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2, NRSV). We do so first, by remembering what we have done and failed to do; second, by doing everything in our power to restore the human dignity and material loss of our sisters and brothers; third, by repairing the moral and spiritual breach that was formed between the offended and the offenders; and fourth, by sincerely attempting to reconcile all differences that are directly related to our behaviors of the past.

II. Remember

Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you. (Deut.32:7, NRSV)

The duties required in the Sixth Commandment are: all careful studies and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others, by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defense thereof against violence; patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit, a sober use of meat, drink, physic, sleep, labor, and recreation; by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild, and courteous speeches and behavior, forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent. (The Book of Confessions, PC(USA), The Larger Catechism, 7.245)

While it is appropriate to remember and to celebrate our Presbyterian witness in America, it is also appropriate to remember and acknowledge that our witness has not always been honorable. The “New World” was already inhabited when the Puritans from England, Presbyterians among them, arrived on the northeast coast of the North American continent. They, along with other Europeans, participated in the displacement and

slaughter of thousands of native peoples. Furthermore, in our efforts to reach native peoples with the gospel of Jesus Christ, we also pursued programs and policies that contributed to the virtual destruction of Native American and Alaskan Native cultures.

One might well argue that we should not stand in judgment of our Presbyterian and Christian fore-parents of other communions. They were zealous for the gospel of God through Jesus Christ and they, in a very real sense, were struggling to survive in an often-hostile environment. There is truth in those statements. But one must wonder how our Presbyterian and other Christian fore-parents could be eager to embrace their own religious freedoms and fail to consider the religious freedoms of indigenous peoples.

Indeed, Portugal began to transport enslaved Africans to Europe as early as 1492.³ The European slave trade lasted for more than four hundred years. During that time Africa lost nearly forty million people. Approximately twenty million of those women and men were brought to the “New World.” Millions more died during capture, at sea, or soon after arrival.⁴ Families were torn asunder, cultures were destroyed, whole nations were decimated, women, children, and men were forced to spend their lives as chattel in the homes and fields of good Christians all over Europe and the Americas, yet our Presbyterian fore-parents made no definitive statements about such sordid and inhumane activities until 1818.⁵ Even then, Presbyterians made strong condemnatory statements against the sin of slavery, but invoked no sanction against members of its constituency who owned slaves.⁶

There were Presbyterians who worked tirelessly to evangelize and educate both Native and African Americans. There were Presbyterian missionaries who risked their lives to establish Native American congregations and to teach enslaved Africans to read and write even though it was illegal. Notwithstanding such bold and commendable activities, many Presbyterian congregations of the period remained conspicuously silent; by their silence, they made a private peace with entrenched evil.

Native and African Americans were not the only people who were harmed by American policies and practices however. Alaskan Natives endured assaults on their land and insults against their culture. Immigrants from Asia experienced discrimination in employment and other prejudices. When American forces landed in Gúanica in 1898 during the Spanish-American War, most Puerto Ricans greeted them as liberators from Spanish colonialism. Few imagined that the island would remain a possession of the United States to this day, only achieving the limited self-rule of commonwealth status in 1952. In the process, many Puerto Ricans lost their land and migrated to the continental United States.⁷

In 1942, eight months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States government asked Mexico for help. More than four hundred thousand Mexican workers came to the United States to work in our nation’s service industries as we geared up for the war effort. These Mexican workers were called the helping arms, “braceros” in Spanish. The American and Mexican governments required that ten percent of each worker’s pay be withheld and deposited in interest-bearing accounts through the Wells-Fargo Bank. Wells-Fargo was to then transfer those savings to Mexican banks where they would be held until the braceros returned to Mexico to collect it. No one knows what happened to those funds. What is evident to those familiar with the situation is that the braceros never received their money. The United States and Mexican governments are, even now, resisting the efforts of social justice groups to discover what happened and to assure that the braceros or their descendants receive just and due compensation by claiming such legal notions as “lapse of time” and “sovereign immunity,” as justifiable causes for their intractability.⁸

We are called by God through Jesus the Christ to remember our entire history. As we remember our sins of the past, we are compelled to confess our sins and to repent for those things we have

done, or left undone, that have caused injury to innocent peoples. Remembering is a form of confession, and it is the first step in the process of reparations.

III. Repair and Restore

When someone steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, the thief shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. The thief shall make restitution, but if unable to do so, shall be sold for the theft. (Ex. 22:1, NRSV)

If someone is caught kidnapping another Israelite, enslaving or selling the Israelite, then that kidnapper shall die. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. (Deut. 24:7, NRSV)

Urges States to reinforce protection against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance by ensuring that all persons have access to effective and adequate remedies and enjoy the right to seek from competent national tribunals and other national institutions just and adequate reparation and satisfaction for any damages as a result of such discrimination.

The next steps in the reparation process involve repairing the breach caused by the sinful behaviors of the past and making every effort to restore the dignity and the material losses of those who have been harmed. A noteworthy example of reparation and restoration was taken in Durban, South Africa, during the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in September 2001. Members of the human family from all over the world were present, including a delegation from the PC(USA) and other Presbyterians. The report from that delegation, approved by the 214th General Assembly (2002), recommended that Presbyterians study the Declaration and Programme of Action from this conference (Minutes, 2002, Part I, pp. 55–56, 711–26). This declaration articulated the complexity of the problem of race in the world. A portion of that declaration, in the section entitled, “Source, causes, forms and contemporary manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance” is pertinent to the notions of repairing and restoring breaches in human relationships that were formed as a consequence of the oppression and exploitation of certain groups of people. It reads:

We acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity not only because of their abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of their magnitude, organized nature and especially their negation of the essence of the victims, and further acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that the Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences; We recognize that colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of colonialism and continue to be victims of its consequences. We acknowledge the suffering caused by colonialism and affirm that, wherever and whenever it occurred, it must be condemned and its reoccurrence prevented. We further regret that the effects and persistence of these structures and practices have been among the factors contributing to lasting social and economic inequalities in many parts of the world today.¹⁰

This part of the United Nation’s declaration from the conference in Durban is important because it confesses harms done to oppressed peoples, acknowledges that harms done in the past impact the present, and is inclusive of a broad array of the world’s people. Unfortunately, the official representatives of the United States government walked out of the conference on the first day. Nevertheless, it is significant that the world community felt it appropriate to stay, participate, acknowledge and confess its complicity in such “crimes against humanity” as the transatlantic slave trade, and seek opportunities for reparation and restoration. Breaches in human relationships cannot be repaired if there is no acknowledgement and confession of harms done and sins committed. Relationships remain broken. Suspicion and distrust continue to characterize the interaction between the disparate groups of people in the church and the society.

Another important aspect of reparation and restoration is forgiveness. Once there is a sincere acknowledgment and confession of offenses, then injured persons can begin the process of forgiving and broken relationships can begin to mend. It is indeed a process—one that will take time to complete. Attending elements in this process are efforts to rectify the wrongdoing through tangible acts designed to reverse the injustices imposed on innocent people.

We have already provided a partial list of peoples who have sued for and received some measure of compensation for the harms visited upon them. Other peoples seeking reparations today include, the Mapuche, an aboriginal people of Southern Chile who are seeking reparations for lands taken from them by European immigrants as far back as 1540 and the Inuit of Arctic Canada¹¹ who are also seeking the restoration of ancestral land taken by European immigrants.

Representative John Conyers (D-Mich.) introduced bill House Resolution 40, The Commission to Study Reparations for African Americans Act, in 1989 and in every succeeding Congress since that time. It has never gotten out of committee nor has the United States government ever apologized for its role in the transatlantic slave trade, the enslavement of Africans and Native Americans, or the laws it created to legalize slavery.

The Conyers bill is just one of the more recent efforts to secure reparations for African Americans. In 1867, Representative Thaddeus Stevens argued in favor of a Slave Reparations Bill, House Resolution 29.¹² In 1915 Cornelius J. Jones filed a lawsuit against the United States Department of the Treasury in an attempt to recover sixty-eight million dollars for former slaves.¹³ William Patterson and Paul Robeson petitioned the United Nations in 1951 charging the United States government with the crime of genocide against Black Americans.¹⁴ Queen Mother Moore's Reparations Committee filed a claim in California in 1962.¹⁵ In 1997, Representative Tony P. Hall (D-Ohio) submitted a bill in the House of Representatives proposing that Congress apologize for slavery.¹⁶ In 2003, Representatives Clifford Stearns (R-Fla.), Elijah E. Cummings (D-Md.), Jack Quinn (R-N.Y.), and James P.

Moran (D-Va.) introduced House Resolution 196 “to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to establish a memorial to slavery, in the District of Columbia.”¹⁷

A simple apology from the United States government for its role in the establishment and maintenance, by law and through economic mandate, of the systematic enslavement of millions of African peoples for 249 years would go a long way toward healing the racial breach between European and African Americans. Opponents of reparations for slavery argue variously that:

- They never held slaves and therefore should not be held accountable for the deeds of their fore-parents.

- Descendants of slaves should quit complaining about the past and pour their energies into improving the present and building the future.

- African Americans are just looking for a handout.

- So much time has past since the abolition of slavery that the subject should be forgotten.

- A nationwide discussion about the propriety of paying reparations to African Americans, in particular, will further polarize the country along racial lines.

These dangerous arguments deny a fundamental spiritual truth—confession is good for the soul and essential for healing and renewing our spirits.

In comments on the September 1952 Luxembourg Agreement in which Germany agreed to pay reparations to Israel, Israel’s prime minister at the time, David Ben-Gurion said, “For the first time in the history of relations between people, a precedent has been created by which a great State, as a result of moral pressure alone, takes it upon itself to pay compensation to the victims of the government that preceded it. For the first time in the history of a people that has been persecuted, oppressed, plundered and despoiled for hundreds of years in the countries of Europe, a persecutor and despoiler has been obliged to return part of his spoils and has even undertaken to

make collective reparations as partial compensation for material losses.”¹⁸ Former Prime Minister Ben-Gurion’s statement clearly addresses the second important step in the process of reparations—restoration of the human dignity and material losses of injured parties. And notice, it was not the perpetrators of violence and enslavement of Jewish peoples who paid reparations: it was their successors! This act of reparations reminds us that we inherit both the benefits that accrued to our ancestors as well as the responsibility of properly managing all that comes with them.

In the course of our history, our national leaders have occasionally apologized for the sins of the past. For example,

... in 1998 President Clinton signed into law the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Study Site Act, which officially acknowledges an 1864 attack by seven hundred U.S. soldiers on a peaceful Cheyenne village located in the territory of Colorado. Hundreds, largely women and children, were killed. The act calls for the establishment of a federally funded Historic Site at Sand Creek.¹⁹

President Clinton, on behalf of the United States government and its citizens, apologized for a sin that American soldiers committed against the Cheyenne people one hundred thirty-four years ago. Clearly our government felt some sense of responsibility for the past sins of our fathers and mothers. And though no material compensation was made to the descendants of those who were slaughtered at Sand Creek, there was the tacit acknowledgement of the slaughtered Cheyenne people’s humanity. Apologies for other historic wrongs with contemporary consequences could foster healing between peoples who have been violated and European Americans.

A disproportionate percentage of Native, African, and Hispanic Americans, in comparison to European Americans, languish in poverty, lack adequate health care, and lag behind the rest of the population in educational attainment. Too many Native American reservations, African American ghettos, and Hispanic American barrios are characterized by high unemployment and underemployment, domestic violence, crime, disease, alcoholism, and drug addiction. None of this is incidental.²⁰

Due to the violence done to these communities through a lack of equal opportunity in job markets and educational institutions, disparity in wages, and difficulty in

securing capital to either begin small business ventures or finance homes, hard working people are compelled to eek out an existence the best way they can.²¹

The United States government forcibly removed Native Americans from their ancestral homelands onto reservations and consequently out of the mainstream of American political, economic, social, and educational

opportunity. Alaskan Natives endured efforts to suppress their culture. Similarly African Americans, after a brief period of Reconstruction, were forced to endure almost another hundred years of racial segregation during the Jim Crow semi-slavery period. Many Mexican Americans lost their land as the United States expanded and consumed more than half of what used to be Mexico. Many other Hispanic Americans are new immigrants to this country. As such, they are subject to the same race, class, and ethnic prejudices that virtually all emigrant communities have had to endure. However, their circumstances are exacerbated in part because of their skin color. Although United States citizens, Puerto Ricans are often viewed and treated as foreigners. It is patently unreasonable and unfair to expect those who have only recently (within the past forty years) been the recipients of affirmative action, civil and human rights, to have caught up with the rest of the American population. If we ever hope to face the future together as a united Republic, we must honestly acknowledge, confess, and attempt to repair the harms done in our collective past. Reconciliation cannot occur if there is no acknowledgement of guilt. The breach remains.

IV. Reconciliation

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chr. 7:14, NRSV)

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5: 23–24, NRSV)

We live in the hope that race and class prejudices will be overcome in our lifetimes. Yet we remain unwilling to acknowledge the sins of our fathers and mothers, as well as the fact that we receive residual benefits from the advantages that accrued to them because of their sins. Like our ancestors of the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, contemporary churches consistently craft statements, authorize and conduct studies of pressing social, economic, political, and societal problems that address the moral, spiritual, and ethical dilemmas of our nation, our church, and the world that we live in. We even confess our collective sinfulness and receive assurances of pardon in our services of worship, but we consistently fail to live up to our confessions, implement policies that possess the capacity to transform human lives and relationships, and challenge systems and institutions that continue to sin in tangible ways.

Reconciliation implies repair. As followers of Jesus Christ, we, of all people, should be willing to compensate those whom we have harmed. Our verbal and written confessions, while important, are far less than adequate means of repairing the harms done, restoring the losses, and reconciling the relationships that have been broken. Concrete steps are required to produce the quality of healing that we so desperately want and need.

We cannot afford to live, work and worship in denial of our collective and historic sinfulness against other human beings. We must boldly demonstrate the willingness to re-enter relationships with people who have been forced to and are presently living in the margins of American society by forthrightly doing our part to welcome them back to the center of the body politic. As a church we have yet to act forthrightly to redress these wrongs.

A survey conducted by the Presbyterian Panel in 2003 revealed that the majority of respondents are opposed to the PC(USA) General Assembly taking a stand on the questions of reparations; recognize that the task of racial reconciliation is not complete in the United States; and are not as well-informed on the history of reparations in America as they should be. (See Appendix A.) Such results indicate that a churchwide study and dialogue of the issues related to reparations should be undertaken with all deliberate speed because attempts to achieve true reconciliation with those who have been harmed are futile apart from remembering, repairing, restoring, and redressing injustices.

V. Conclusion

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: When any of you sin and commit a trespass against the LORD by deceiving a neighbor in a matter of a deposit or a pledge, or by robbery, or if you have defrauded a neighbor, or have found something lost and lied about it—if you swear falsely regarding any of the various things that one may do and sin thereby—when you have sinned and realize your guilt, and would restore what you took by robbery or by fraud or by deposit that was committed to you, or the lost thing that you found, or anything else about which you have sworn

falsely, you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it. You shall pay it to its owner when you realize your guilt. (Lev. 6:1–5, NRSV)

Q. 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation.

Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him. (The Book of Confessions, PC(USA), The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.001)

Our God is the sovereign Lord of all creation. Every thing and every one was created by God for God's glory. We, along with all of God's creation, are to worship and enjoy God forever. Our worship and enjoyment of God is the tie that binds us together with God, one another, and God's whole creation. However, our sin against God, one another, and God's creation has rendered us spiritually broken and relationally disconnected from God, our neighbors, and the world in which we live.

Sinfulness against God extends beyond our personal relationships with God and one another. Evil resides in systems, structures, institutions, and agencies, and therefore impacts and involves whole communities. To the extent that we, believers in God through Christ Jesus, support, participate in, and invest in such systems, structures, institutions, and agencies, we sin against God as well as those people who are exploited and oppressed by those entities. We sin collectively, as a community of faith. It is therefore also as a community of faith that we must acknowledge and confess our sin, repent, and engage in acts of restoration.

In recognition of our sinfulness and brokenness, God sent God's son Jesus into the world to reconcile humankind to God's Self and one another. Indeed, the whole creation is waiting for the redemption of the children of God. Jesus, in complete obedience to God, went to the cross where he paid the penalty of our sin. He died and was buried in a borrowed tomb but our merciful God did not leave him there. God raised Jesus from death to life. Now, all who believe in God through Jesus the Christ are freed from bondage to sin and death.

We are reconciled to God through the propitious sacrifice of Christ Jesus on the cross of Calvary and by the grace of God that was, and is, available to us through him. And God has given those who believe in God through Christ Jesus the grace and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, that we might all again worship and enjoy God forever; and, work to repair the relational bonds that were broken though and because of our sinfulness. This sacrifice is the rationale and model for reparations.

Those who believe in God through Christ Jesus are mystically united in one body, the church. We belong to one another through our baptisms and are reminded, every time we break and eat the bread and drink the cup, that we are called to demonstrate the kind of love from each other that God demonstrated to us through Christ Jesus. We are therefore accountable to God for the way that we treat other members of the body and, indeed, other members of the human family along with God's creation.

Insofar as we are aware of our sinfulness against God and other human beings, we are called by God, through Christ Jesus, to repair the breach through the acknowledgement and confession of sin, repentance, and acts of restoration. Our Lord, Christ Jesus, taught us to do everything in our power to repair broken relationships even when we suspect that our sisters and brothers have something against us (Matt. 5:23–24, NRSV). This requires more than a little humility. Yet by God's grace we possess the capacity to do it by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

We are also called by God, through Christ Jesus, to forgive one another even as we have been forgiven by God. The practice of forgiveness closes the circle of healing and allows for the creation of relationships based on the grace of God, the love of Christ Jesus, and the common humanity of us all. Through forgiveness we release our sisters and brothers from the guilt and shame of their offensive behavior. We set them, and ourselves, free to walk in the newness of life that was so graciously given to us by faith and through the grace of God that was at work in Christ Jesus.

When we remember our past sins, confess, repent, and do all we can to restore those whom we have intentionally or unintentionally harmed, reconciliation is possible. It is then that a renewal in our relationship with God and fellow human beings can begin.

We are called by our confessional standards to be diligent in the renewal of life (The Book of Confessions, PC(USA), The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.101). Zacchaeus' restoration to

fellowship with God and community involved both reparations and a determination to sin no more (Luke 19:8, NRSV). Our desire for renewal in God through Christ Jesus requires no less of us. As members of the body of Christ Jesus, we need to be renewed in the power of the Holy Spirit so that we might attain unity and peace with God, address together the hopelessness and despair that exists among our injured sisters and brothers, and heal our wounded souls, accepting the cost of discipleship willingly.

Endnotes

1. Winbush, Raymond A. ed., *Should America Pay? Slavery and the Raging Debate on Reparations* (New York: Amistad, 2003), p. xii. A listing of the compensation various Native American Nations received from the United States government includes the following: 1971, \$1 billion and 44 million acres of land to Alaska Natives; 1980, \$81 million to the Klamaths of Oregon; 1985, \$105 million to the Lakota of South Dakota; 1985, \$12.3 million to the Seminoles of Florida; 1985, \$31 million to the Chippewas of Wisconsin; and 1986, \$32 million to the Ottawas of Michigan.
2. Chinweizu, "Reparations and A New Global Order: A Comparative Overview," www.arm.arc.co.uk/NewGlobalOrder.html. (Checked January 2003).
3. Bennett, Lerone, Jr. *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America, 1619–1946*. (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1964), p. 34.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
5. Wilmore, Gayraud S., *Black and Presbyterian: The Heritage and the Hope* (Louisville: Witherspoon, 1998), p. 30.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 61–63.
8. Bustamante, Cruz, "Give the braceros their due." *San Francisco Chronicle*, Open Forum, August 7, 2002.
9. Report of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, Republic of South Africa, 31 August–8 September 2001, p. 63. The report is online at www.unhchr.ch/html/racism.
10. Report of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, Republic of South Africa, 31 August–8 September 2001, pp. 11–12. The report is online at www.unhchr.ch/html/racism.
11. Chinweizu.
12. Blue Ribbon Panel on Reparations for Slavery of The Chicago Metropolitan Association, The Church, Reparations, and Justice: Moving From Silence to Actions (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Metropolitan Association of the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ: September 10, 2002), p. 15.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. To view a copy of the resolution, visit <http://thomas.loc.gov/> (the legislative information Web site provided by the Library of Congress) and enter the resolution number.
18. Robinson, Randall. *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 2000), pp. 223–24.
19. *Ibid.*, 224.
20. Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ, *Reparations: A Process for Repairing the Breach, A Study and Discussion Guide for Local Congregations, Associations, and Conferences*, (Cleveland, Ohio: no date), Appendix B.
21. *Ibid.*

Appendix A

THE PRESBYTERIAN PANEL
Fall 2003 Special Survey
Reparations

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

* = less than 0.5%; rounds to zero

□ = zero (0.0); no cases in this category

	Members	Elders		Ministers
Number of surveys mailed		1,052	1,305	1,403
Number of surveys returned		550	816	946‡
Percent returned		52%	62%	67%

‡ Of the 946 returned surveys, 625 came from pastors and 321 from specialized clergy.