



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 0409

**State Government - Maryland Reparations Commission - Establishment
(Harriet Tubman Community Investment Act)**

FAVORABLE

TO: Delegate Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk, Chair. Delegate Arian B. Kelly, Vice-Chair and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee.

FROM: Rev. Kenneth Phelps, Jr., Co-Director, Maryland Episcopal Public Policy Network

DATE: March 1, 2023

The Right Reverend James Kemp, Second Bishop of Maryland (1816 – 1827) once said: “When any country, and particularly a young one, finds that men whose principles are unfriendly to their peace and happiness are flooding in upon them, they may with much propriety declare that such men shall be placed under certain limitations and restrictions. But to do this and then to suffer their own citizens to steal said men from their own country cannot be defended on any principle. Further to extend slavery to unborn children is a thing for which I do not know even the shadow of reason.”

And, to quote our current Bishop, Eugene Taylor Sutton: “People in the United States, in the Episcopal Church and in the Diocese of Maryland have inherited our share of breaches and broken places, especially with our legacy of slavery. For generations the bodies of black and brown people did not belong to themselves, but were bred, used, and sold for the purpose of attaining wealth. Not only did our nation prosper under this evil institution, but our Episcopal Church profited as well.”

However, as Jesus teaches us, a structure with a broken foundation cannot hope to stand. The subject of reparations is mired in emotion; it is often mischaracterized and certainly largely misunderstood. It is a complex issue that involves economic, political, and sociological dimensions that are difficult to grasp without a willingness to engage more deeply than having a quick emotional response to the word. The issue highlights the racial divide among us, creates varying levels of resentment and suspicion, and accentuates a pain that has long plagued our country since its founding.



Reparations, at its base, means to repair that which has been broken. It is not just about monetary compensation. An act of reparation is the attempt to make whole again, and/or to restore; to offer atonement; to make amends; to reconcile for a wrong or injury.

And isn't that our collective work in this broken world?

And our own to this vision will require honest reflection and a holy devotion to reconciliation. Forgiveness alone is but one step in the long journey to reconcile our past with the present. We need to repair the broken places and wounds that we have all inherited from centuries of the degrading treatment of our fellow human beings.

While the history of slavery is widely understood in the U.S., the continuing impact of its legacy is less understood. The symptoms and wounds of that old sin continue to poison our society and threaten the health of the Body of Christ of which we are all a part. After the hard-fought abolition of slavery, there was a fateful denial in our nation of reparations for freed African American people for their centuries of undeserved bondage, even though in many instances white plantation owners received reparations in the form of compensation for the losses they incurred from the Civil War and the end of slavery. Racism and greed fueled that basic injustice, and those attitudes have poisoned race relations ever since. From the implementation of Jim Crow laws, lynching, segregation, redlining, job discrimination and unequal funding for majority African American school districts, to our own segregated church demographics, we see that we have not fully reckoned with our past. We are not yet fully a community or a nation of love.

It is time for all of us to understand how power gained by force and wielded unevenly impacts African Americans in this country. We can all celebrate the tremendous strides that have been made in racial attitudes in our nation, and we are very proud of the accomplishments of many individuals who have overcome great odds to achieve success. But for the millions of descendants of American slaves who are trapped in a pernicious cycle of hopelessness, poverty and rage due to their real experience of racial segregation, redlining, inferior schools and the like, the widespread assumption that everyone can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps is a long way from being accurate.

They know that the odds are against them on so many fronts: they cannot change their environment, and they cannot change the color of their dark skin. All of these



factors have played into creating a lack of power for brown and black people. This lack is a social problem: it goes beyond an individual's character and will. It is time for all of us to move towards a place of acceptance of humans who want the same things we do, but who have not been found to be worthy of those desires by the dominant society.

The time to act is now. It will take courage and vision. But, we believe that true reconciliation and peace can only be achieved by repairing what has been broken.

The Diocese of Maryland requests a Favorable report