

Rev. Timothy B. Warner's HB 964 Testimony

Good afternoon, my name is Rev. Tim Warner, and I have proudly served the Emory Grove UMC as its Sr. Pastor for the last 12 years. I'm pleased to speak on behalf of our entire church in enthusiastic support of HB 964. I do so because of the lasting impact the trauma of urban renewal had, not only on the town, but on the people who lived there, multiple generations of their offspring, and even on the new Americans who have now come from every corner of the globe to call Emory Grove home.

After spending years doing the delicate work of relationship-building after I arrived at the church 11 years ago, I held a visioning retreat with leaders where we struck at the core of what I describe as a malaise that had fallen over the congregation that had caused it to have fallen into disrepair, organizational strife and steadily declining membership. The people of the church, substantially comprised by up to 5 generations of the founding families of the town, were mourning the destruction of the community their forbears who were former slaves had built, lived in and thrived in, caused by urban renewal.

In their narrative, they had been told by the government that the houses they owned were substandard, and that if they sold their land to the government, the government would construct better houses that they would be able to purchase. Homeowners sold their homes and land for pennies on the dollar to the government, and instead of houses that they could afford to buy, they were priced out of purchasing the homes that were eventually built, and received instead lots of Section 8 multi-family dwellings they could rent, and what was then a new recreation center and a pool. The physical community they had built, largely with their own hands, the businesses they had created against all odds, and the life they had created and lived together were all destroyed, and for generations now the community has been left to live out a traumatic narrative caused by intentional concentration of poverty where a functional and culturally-rich community used to be.

To be clear, there was first the trauma of slavery, then Montgomery County's version of Jim Crow, then urban renewal, followed by life in concentrated

poverty created by the government. This has been a repeated pattern of trauma across generations of people, and the result had been the slow death of the only remaining community institution, the church.

Dr. Joy Degruy, in her ***Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*** characterizes what the church was experiencing well. She writes, "Multi-generational trauma together with continued oppression and absence of opportunity to experience the benefits available in the society lead to Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome... I have identified three categories [of behavior]: vacant esteem, ever-present anger, racist socialization... Vacant Esteem is the state of believing oneself to have little or no worth, exacerbated by similar pronouncements of inferiority from the personal sphere AND the larger society. Vacant esteem is the net result of three spheres of influence – society community and family... At the community level groups of people establish agreed-upon beliefs about their members' worth, beliefs that are reflected in the community's standards and values regarding acceptable behavior, educational attainment and professional possibilities. These standards and values translate into what achievements are believed to be practical and feasible for it's members. Problems can arrive when these standards and values promote counterproductive behaviors or inaccurately limit people from access to what is truly attainable."

At that same retreat, we formed a vision to rebuild a community on land that we owned or would attain, to restore families offering an opportunity to build generational wealth through homeownership and to welcome our new neighbors to a new community that had the ethic of the old one. We have spent the balance of that time purchasing land and forming the Heritage Emory Grove Community Development Corporation, which is a leading partner in redeveloping the town. The Heritage Emory Grove development project will eventually feature more than 550 units of housing across the full range of affordability. We are working with every branch of our state and local government to accomplish this, as well as non-profit partners.

The question remains, however, particularly as we are but one of more than 40 foundational communities in Montgomery County that have been negatively changed forever by government action, what really happened during the period of urban renewal? Who benefited, and who did not, and why? We applaud Delegate Crutchfield for seeking answers to those questions through HB964, and for asking all of us as a community, what can we do to fix this horrendous problem?