Reparative Justice Frequently Asked Questions and Definitions

By the Dismantling Racism Team of the Presbytery of Baltimore

March 5, 2025

Definitions

Reparations

Following the lead of the PCUSA's Center for Repair of Historical Harms, we reserve the term "reparations" for actions that are taken at the federal or societal level by the United States government. Reparations at its most basic acknowledges past harms and provides economic compensation. In the U.S., reparations are most often focused on the debt owed because of the institution of slavery and its legacy. The term "reparations" has also been used in the context of the U.S. treatment of Native American communities. In 1988, the US Government provided $20,000 each to Japanese American survivors of the U.S. internment camps during World War II.

Repair & Reparative Justice

Terms such as "repair," "reparative action," or "reparative justice" encompass actions taken by institutions or individuals. An action taken by the Presbytery, therefore, we refer to as repair and speak of "reparative" justice insofar as it includes repair of relationships that have always been broken since the founding of our country (and denomination).

General Questions

Why is this a church matter?

The work of repair is grounded in our theological understanding that God created human beings to be in relationship with one another. Indeed, Christ calls us to be reconciled with one another and with God (Matthew 22:39). Dr. William Yoo, associate professor at Columbia Theological Seminary and proponent of repair, states it this way: ". . .we must see our church as it is: the work of saints and sinners who did both good and evil, all in the name of God." He goes on to say: "Our practices of confessing corporate sin and bearing mutual responsibility inform and inspire how we may engage Black racial repair in the PC(USA) today.[1]"

[1] Yoo, William, "The case for Black racial repair in the PCUSA," The Presbyterian Outlook, September 2024, p. 19-23.

How has the Presbytery of Baltimore contributed to or benefitted from systemic racism?

The Dismantling Racism Team has identified four key categories of harms to which the Presbytery contributed or from which it benefitted: direct benefits (e.g., in the form of monetary support from sources tied to slavery); historic underinvestment and neglect; inequities in the management of church properties; and direct violations of trust between the Presbytery and communities or congregations of color.

What reparative action is being proposed?

The Dismantling Racism Team is proposing the creation of a Reparative Justice Fund with seed money from the accumulated wealth (i.e., unrestricted net assets) of the Presbytery of Baltimore. A full proposal will be available in May.

Who would benefit from this fund?

Funds will go to support majority-Black churches, Black-led community groups and nonprofits, within the geographical area of the Presbytery.

Have similar funds been created before?

Yes, the Reparations Task Force of the Episcopal Diocese of MD operates a $1.39 million fund. The Presbyterian Synod of Lakes and Prairies has also set up a nationwide “Restorative Actions” fund.

What is the difference between repair and a grant?

Grants are typically awarded with continued oversight from the source of the funds, while repair funds are freely or voluntarily given, as a servicing of a historical debt that has until now remained unacknowledged. In relinquishing these resources, the Presbytery demonstrates its trust that the affected groups know what they need and how best to use the funds for repair.

Why now?

At the 2022 General Assembly, the overture “An Apology to African Americans for the Sin of Slavery and its Legacy” from Gittings-Lovejoy was adopted. The Presbytery of Baltimore offered a formal concurrence for the overture, which committed the PCUSA to restorative justice and reparations, informed by a closer study of our history.

The Rev. Jermaine Ross-Allam, the Director of the PCUSA Center for the Repair of Historical Harm, has called on churches and church institutions to engage in the work of repair "as soon as possible," and "for as long as it takes." It is past time for the Presbytery to act. If the foundation of your home was damaged, wouldn't you act to make sure it was repaired as soon as possible?

Where did this proposal originate?

The Reparative Justice Working Group was chartered in August of 2022 by the Dismantling Racism Team. The Working Group is made up of clergy and ruling elders from Knox, Govans, Light Street, Christ our Anchor, Faith Presbyterian Churches, and TJ Denley ordained to specialized ministry, with Presbytery staff support from Susan Krehbiel.

Where can I learn more about repair and reparations?

Yoo, William "The case for Black racial repair in the PCUSA, "The Presbyterian Outlook, September 2024, updated January 9, 2025. https://pres-outlook.org/2024/09/127388/

PCUSA Center for the Repair of Historic Harms
https://pcusa.org/about-pcusa/agencies-entities/interim-unified-agency/ministry-areas/repair-historic-harms

Article about one PCUSA congregation's act of repair
https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/pennsylvania-church-surrenders-part-proceeds-sale-its-manse-lenape-people

A powerful 8-minute video on PCUSA's reparative work in Juneau, Alaska.
https://vimeo.com/969327048

An article about Memorial Episcopal Church in Baltimore
https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-maryland-baltimore-slavery-503b1557f9af4389e834b497a961e077

Next Steps

May 12, 2025 The full written proposal will be available on the presbytery website so you can read it prior to the May 22, 2025 Presbytery Meeting.

May date TBD Q & A session on Zoom to answer any questions about the proposal

May 22, 2025 First Reading of the proposal at the 907th Stated Meeting of the Presbytery of Baltimore

September TBD Second Q & A session on the proposal

September 13, 2025 Presbytery vote on the Reparative Justice Fund proposal at the 908th Stated Meeting of the Presbytery of Baltimore.