News



Rev. Brian C. Herron of Zion Baptist Church thrust his fist in the air as Clergy of color led a Silent Clergy March, June 2, 2020, to the George Floyd Memorial for prayers in Minneapolis. A Minnesota initiative seeks to address social justice concerns of African Americans and Native Americans in a unified way. (Star Tribune via AP/David Joles)

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The Episcopal Diocese of Texas acknowledges that its first bishop in 1859 was a slaveholder. An Episcopal church erects a plaque noting the building's creation in New York City in 1810 was made possible by wealth resulting from slavery.

And the Minnesota Council of Churches cites a host of injustices, from mid-19th century atrocities against Native Americans to police killings of Black people, in launching a first-of-its kind "truth and reparations" initiative engaging its 25 member denominations.

These efforts reflect a widespread surge of interest among many U.S. religious groups in the area of reparations, particularly among long-established Protestant churches that were active in the era of slavery. Many are weighing how to make amends through financial investments and long-term programs benefiting African Americans.

Some major denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, have not embraced reparations as official policy. The Episcopal Church has been the most active major denomination thus far, and others, including the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, are urging congregations to consider similar steps.

The Minnesota Council of Churches initiative was announced in October.

"Minnesota has some of the highest racial disparities in the country — in health, wealth, housing, how police treat folks," said the council's CEO, the Rev. Curtiss DeYoung. "Those disparities all come from a deep history of racism."

The initiative, envisioned as a 10-year undertaking, is distinctive in several ways: It engages a diverse collection of Christian denominations, including some that are predominantly Black; it will model some of its efforts on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission created in South Africa after the end of apartheid; and it is based in Minneapolis, where the police killing of George Floyd in May sparked global protests over racial injustice.

"This particular event, because it was right here where we live, was a call to action," DeYoung said. "The first thing that we did, of course, like everyone else, was get into the streets and march ... but there are deep, historic issues that require more than marching."



Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs sits at Fort Snelling State Park, Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2020, near Minneapolis, at a memorial site of what was a concentration camp where some 1,600 Dakota people were imprisoned in the aftermath of the 1862 U.S. - Dakota Conflict. Jacobs belongs to a Wisconsin-based Mohican tribe but was born in Minnesota and is well-versed in the grim chapters of its history regarding Native Americans. It is one of the historic sites in the Twin Cities area where he take social-justice groups on tours. (AP/Jim Mone)

The Minnesota initiative also seeks to address social justice concerns of African Americans and Native Americans in a unified way.

"For so long these have been two separate camps — Indigenous people and African Americans felt they are competing against each other for the same limited

resources," said the Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs, a Native American who is the church council's director of racial justice.

Jacobs belongs to a Wisconsin-based Mohican tribe but was born in Minnesota and is well-versed in the latter's grim history about Native Americans. He cited the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, which ended with the internment of hundreds of Dakota people and the hanging of 38 Dakota men in Mankato — the largest mass execution in U.S. history. After the war, many of the Dakota were expelled from Minnesota.

The Rev. Stacey Smith, presiding elder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Minnesota and a Council of Churches board member, said the reparations initiative places the state "at the epicenter of being transformed with racial justice."

"Truth-telling in our stories is so important," she said. "There has been such a vacuum of missing stories, not only from Black and brown people but our Indigenous people and others as well."

In the Episcopal Church, several dioceses — including Maryland, Texas, Long Island and New York — launched reparations programs in the past 13 months, and others are preparing them.

"What is common across the whole church is the recognition that it's time to address and reckon with the wrongs and evils of our past," said New York Bishop Andrew Dietsche.

The largest Episcopal pledge has come from the Diocese of Texas, which said in February it would allocate $13 million to long-term programs. These include scholarships for students attending seminaries or historically Black colleges and assistance for historic Black churches.

The Texas Diocese bishop, C. Andrew Doyle, noted the diocese's first bishop, Alexander Gregg, was a slaveholder and its first church, in Matagorda, was built with slave labor.

The Diocese of New York, which serves part of New York City and seven counties to the north, was similarly blunt while unveiling its $1.1 million reparations initiative in November 2019.

Dietsche said the diocese played a "significant, and genuinely evil, part in American slavery" — including some churches' use of slaves as parish servants. He noted that

in 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, delegates at the diocese's convention refused to approve a resolution condemning slavery.

"We have a great deal to answer for," Dietsche said.



A plaque sits at the steps of St. James Episcopal Church, Friday Dec. 4, 2020, in New York's Upper East Side neighborhood, acknowledging the church's wealth created with slave labor. (AP/Bebeto Matthews)

In the past year, a multiracial committee has been studying possible uses for the reparations funds. Dietsche expects some will help congregations launch their own initiatives, particularly if their churches had historical involvement in slavery.

St. James' Episcopal Church in Manhattan dedicated a plaque a year ago with the inscription, "In solemn remembrance of the enslaved persons whose labor created wealth that made possible the founding of St. James' Church" in 1810.

The Episcopal Diocese of Maryland voted in September to create a $1 million reparations fund, likely to finance programs supporting Black students, nursing home residents, small-business owners and others.

While Dietsche and Doyle are white, the bishop of Maryland, Eugene Sutton, is the first Black cleric in that post. He has talked with white people who oppose reparations, saying they're not personally guilty of slaveholding or racism.

"That is a false conception," Sutton said. "Reparations is simply, 'What will this generation do to repair the damage caused by previous generations?' ... We may not all be guilty, but we all have a responsibility."

Sutton said the $1 million allocation represents about 20% of the diocese's operating budget.

"We wanted something that would actually not just be a drop in the bucket," he said. "We've done that in recognition of the fact that this church, as well as many other churches and institutions, benefited from theft. We stole from the impoverished, from the African American community."

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