

Repairing the Breach:
Faith-Based Reparations in the
Greater Lansing Area

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Abstract

Faith-based reparations for Black Americans has been a topic of conversation since at least 1969. While many in the northern United States believe they are “without sin” from the effects of slavery, Jim Crow, and other racist policies, this paper will prove that that is not the case. Policies in the Greater Lansing Area have negatively impacted Black citizens. While the local faith community has historically advocated for the repeal of such policies, the predominately white institutions have benefited from such policies. They have freely bought homes in whichever communities they desired, have had fewer problems finding employment, have had better opportunities to educate their children, and statistically more access to healthcare.

This paper will show that deep divides still exist in our communities. Black citizens are still largely segregated into specific neighborhoods. The wage gap between Black and white Americans is at its widest point in decade. While advocacy in our religious communities is important and necessary in healing these injustices, faith-based reparations, as outlined in the following pages, can be paramount.

Introduction

In 1929, Earl and Louise Little moved their family from Milwaukee to Lansing. The Black family bought a home in the whites-only subdivision of Westmont. A white supremacy group known as the Black Legion harassed the family, trying to convince them to move out of the neighborhood. When the family resisted, their home was burned to the ground.

Two years later, Earl was beaten and left for dead on Lansing’s streetcar tracks where he was run over.

His son, the future Malcolm X, was six years old at the time.

This act of racial violence would not be the last and it would be followed by policies that would prevent Black families from growing generational wealth and realizing the true promise of emancipation that their grandparents were promised in the 19th century.

Each community and municipality had their own doctrines.

In East Lansing, restrictive covenants were added into most residential property deeds, not allowing the homes to be sold to anyone who wasn't Caucasian. Rental properties were just as closed-off. When Clarence Underwood and his family arrived in East Lansing in 1955, he was eager to start a new chapter as a graduate student at Michigan State College (MSC). However, he was repeatedly told by prospective landlords that, "We don't rent to negroes."

In 1963, the East Lansing Human Relations Committee was formed to study open housing policies. Unfortunately, they were prone to inaction and Black citizens would not be able to purchase homes in the area until 1968 when Congress passed the Fair Housing Act.

MSC professor Dr. David W. D. Dickson became the first Black homeowner in 1953 when John Hannah, the college president, bought him a home on the sly. Dr. Robert Green was the first Black person to purchase a home in East Lansing on his own accord in 1968.

Meanwhile in the city of Lansing, redlining was a powerful tool to keep Black citizens out of more white, more affluent neighborhoods. Redlining was a federal policy whereby communities were split into zones based on which areas could get federal mortgage backing and which could not. Redlining in Lansing occurred at a micro level with blocks and streets being redlined instead of entire sections of the city, as was done in most major cities like Detroit and Chicago. Without federal mortgage backing, Black families were often locked into contracts that were essentially rent-to-own situations. Families could

earn no equity until the full amount was paid and there was no security in their living situation.

The 1960s was a time of rampant urban renewal policies throughout the United States. Between 1963 and 1967, these projects destroyed Black communities throughout the Lansing area. The construction of I-496 bisected one such Black community in the southwest capitol area.

Claiming eminent domain, a home appraiser would simply appear one day at the resident's home, informing them about the value of their home and how much they could get from it from the local or state government. They were also advised not to fight the process because they could not win. No one was offered relocation assistance at the time. Renters and those who were buying their home on contract received nothing.

890 homes were taken in total. Countless businesses and churches and schools were wiped out.

The Greater Lansing area was not the only area hit by these racist policies. It was happening in most American communities, damaging the lives of Black citizens and hindering the growth of generational wealth.

Problem

There are numerous reasons for this country's racial wealth gap; the stain of slavery, emancipation without compensation, the southern history of sharecropping, Jim Crow laws, redlining, and laws like the G.I. Bill of 1944 that were intended to help Americans but only helped white Americans.

All of the above factors (and several more than are not mentioned) were determinates in developing the *racial wealth divide* and *racial pay gap*. Black Americans are the only

ethnic group that started life in the United States with zero wealth. And these divides are structural problems that require structural solutions.

Wealth can be understood as the sum total of what a family owns minus what they owe. A family's wealth accumulation is the amount of wealth they inherit from their family. All of these factors – combined with systemic and structural racism – are reasons why Black Americans have nowhere near the wealth that white Americans hold. These past four hundred years of white industrial domination, resulting in systemic racism, has denied the equal accumulation of wealth to people who shared overwhelmingly in the building and economic development of this country.

The Institute for Policy Studies indicates that white Americans held a total of \$146,984 in wealth per person in 2016 – more than \$35,000 more than they had in 1983. Black Americans, on the other hand, only hold \$3,557 of wealth per person in 2016. This number is less than half of what they had in 1983.

When looking at income inequality, the numbers are just as striking. Black men earn 87 cents for every dollar than white men make. Black women with a high bachelor's degree earn, on average, \$46,694 while white women with the same degree earn more than \$75,000. In fact, Black women with a bachelor's degree earn less than white women with just a high school diploma.

Proposed Solution

Before we offer our proposed remedy, it is important to note that there is not one single venture or policy that can right the historic wrongs that have served as stumbling blocks for Black Americans. We believe that action must happen at every level – federal, state, and local – to truly address the inequalities that we face today. However, it is important that our faith communities take a first step and become leaders in this particular arena.

The subject of reparations for Black Americans as descendants of slavery in the United States is not a new topic. Union General William Tecumseh Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15 in January 1865, allotting forty acres and a mule for freed Black families. Just three months later, however, President Andrew Johnson overturned the order and forced Black families to be removed from the land and it returned to former southern slaveholders.

The word reparations means “the making of amends for a wrong that has been done; repair by paying money, generally help those who have been hurt”.

Since 1989, House Bill 40 has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives, first by Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) and most recently by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX). The bill, which has never been brought to a floor vote, requires, “a commission of thirteen people who would be tasked with examining the history of slavery in the United States and the systemic racism that resulted, including Federal and State Government’s role in supporting it and *recommend appropriate remedies* to Congress.

There has also been a renewed interest in reparations because of recent literature. A 2014 article written for *The Atlantic* by Ta-Nahisi Coates made “The Case for Reparations” quite clearly. Just last year, *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century* by William A. Darity, Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen painstakingly lays out how America has failed and inflicted pain on Black Americans through racist policy a pursuit of white supremacy over equity. They offer the acronym of ARC when it comes to reparations for Black Americans; acknowledgement, redress, and closure. Unfortunately, too many American leaders would opt for only closure and not its two predecessors.

There are examples from around the world of other countries paying reparations to citizens that were harmed by governmental actions. From 1953 to 1967, West Germany paid \$7 billion to the state of Israel and \$1 billion to the World Jewish Congress to atone for the death of millions of European Jews in the Holocaust and the profits made from

slave labor. In 1994, South Africa established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which recommended approximately \$3,500 for six years for each victim of apartheid in that country.

There are numerous domestic examples, as well. After a lengthy history of denying that Alaska Native peoples had aboriginal claims to ancestral lands and resources, Congress answered the question in a very distinctive way. In 1971, Alaska Native aboriginal claims were 'settled' and extinguished through the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). The grant was for \$1 billion and 44 million acres of land to Alaska Natives. This has so far been the largest land claims settlement in U.S. history. Another example is the 1986 grant of \$32 million to the Ottawa Tribe of Michigan. The Treaty of Washington in 1836 is a treaty between the U.S. and representatives of the Ottawa and Chippewa nations of Native Americans. With this treaty, the tribes ceded an area of approximately 13,837,207 acres in the northwest portion of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan and the eastern portion of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. This area represents nearly 40 percent of the current land area of the state of Michigan. Michigan would not have been admitted into the union in 1837 without this land mass. This was an ongoing argument between Michigan and the Native tribes because the original conditions of the treaty were never honored by Michigan and the settlement in 1986 made long overdue amends.

More well-known by most Americans is the reparations offered to Japanese American citizens in 1988 through The Civil Liberties Act. The wartime relocation and internment of Japanese civilians during the 1940s was finally acknowledged as a historical wrong and each interred citizen was given a one-time payment of \$20,000.

Despite all these previous examples of reparations and the general consensus of the sin of slavery and its succeeding laws and policies that attempted to dehumanize Black Americans, we fear that we are no closer to Federal or State reparations today than we were in 1865.

Therefore, we suggest that the faith community in the Greater Lansing Area work together to establish reparations for Black citizens in our area.

Solution Details

We can be proud of the way our local faith communities in the 1950s and 1960s stood by Black citizens in their fight for housing equality. Our forebearers lobbied local government, signed petitions, and marched. They were on the right side of history. Despite this, it's evident that our predominately white religious institutions and their members benefited from the white supremacy they were fighting against. They could freely buy homes in whichever communities they desired. They had fewer problems finding employment, had better opportunities to educate their children, and statistically access to better healthcare.

Our white communities benefited from the white supremacy in our area, even if we worked to dismantle it.

In 1969, the National Black Economic Development Conference adopted James Forman's The Black Manifesto, demanding \$500 million in reparations for the mistreatment of African Americans from white churches and synagogues.

“(W)e know that the churches and synagogues have a tremendous wealth,” the manifesto stated, “and its membership, white America, has profited and still exploits black people.”

Despite this proposal, faith-based reparations never caught on. There have, however, been some churches that instituted their own policies. Memorial Episcopal Church in Baltimore was founded by a slave owner. Earlier this year, they created a \$500,000 fund for reparations to the local Black community.

Churches in the Greater Lansing Area have started doing the work, as well. The First Presbyterian Church of Lansing, All Saints Episcopal Church of East Lansing, and Edgewood United Church have each engaged in difficult conversations about culpability and the sin of racism. They have each initiated a sustained path toward racial justice with intentions of “repairing the breach” as the Old Testament prophet Isaiah instructed.

We believe that by working together, our respective faith-based communities can establish an endowment for reparations for Black citizens in the Greater Lansing Area. While still in the early planning stages, this endowment could be created using funds from church endowments (particularly those of predominately white churches in the area which are facing dwindling numbers but have strong historical endowments), church and community fundraisers, ten percent donations from annual capital campaigns, etc. While the aforementioned churches have helped realize this proposal, it is imperative that we create relationships with more predominately white religious institutions who are interested in financially supporting this effort.

To manage the endowment and administer the funds, we foresee leaders of local predominately Black churches to serve on an advisory board. This body would also be advised by at least one financial expert, ideally volunteering their time for this community effort.

These funds could be used in several ways. A few initial proposals include scholarships for local Black citizens who are attending college or work-development programs, housing loans or grants for first time Black homeowners, and grants for small start-up Black-owned businesses.

Summary

For far too long, good men and women have stood by while policies and laws were implemented that either ignored Black citizens or categorically harmed them. Our local history of housing discrimination is a stalwart example of this.

More than fifty years after these policies were implemented – many of them struck from our books of law – the effects are still being felt. Black Americans have far less individual wealth and earn far less in wages than white Americans. Our governments have been slow to make amends for this history of racial injustice, but faith-based communities have historically been on the right side of history.

Because of this, and our charge to be “repairers of the breach”, we believe that creating a local endowment of funds for Black Americans is a necessary and meaningful step in the right direction.