

REPARATIONS for African Descendants... Is the U.S. there yet?

by Bentley de Bardelaben
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Recently I was in a denominational business meeting where someone asked, “What mission projects can we do together? Anyone familiar with the United Nations campaign ‘International Decade for People of African Descent?’” I was not, so I asked for more information, and what I heard made me excited. But as we sat together the tension began to rise in the room as a proverbial boogeyman was injected into our conversation. “REPARATIONS” was its name. O-M-G! How could a conversation, rich with opportunity, and vastly important to and for millions worldwide get mired down just by saying a single word?

On April 29, 2016, former Attorney General Eric Holder conveyed his thoughts about reparations for the descendants of slaves during a race and justice program at Georgetown University. (Holder’s comments were sparked after a student asked him about the growing body of knowledge regarding the sale of 272 slaves by the Jesuit administrators in order to pay off the school’s debts in 1838.) Reparations, he said, “can mean a whole bunch of different things. You can come up with policies that take into account what slavery meant then, what it means now. Affirmative action can be thought of as reparations, you know? And it takes into account ... the negative impacts of negative racial policies that have hobbled the progress of African-Americans in this country.”

Holder further added, “A lot of the attitudes that we associate with slavery and the post-slavery era are still resonant, you know, in the United States now. And if we’re not willing to admit that—and it’s not even a question of admitting it, you know? Study it, understand it, realize it—deal with the facts.”

It has been more than 400 years since the days of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and at least 15 million men, women, and children were its victims. Dealing with facts and addressing emotions is key to being able to move this often volatile conversation toward reconciliation. Many descendants in the Americas and beyond have been, and still are, impacted by this atrocious industry, which at

its core dehumanized God’s people through sadistic cruelty unseen in human history, before or since.

In 2007, the U.N. declared March 27 the International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This day offers us an opportunity to remember those who suffered and died at the hands of the brutal slavery system and raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice, which continue today. Inviting people to further study the effects of the Transatlantic Slave Trade is a goal of the “International Decade for People of African Descent,” which launched in 2015.

In 2001, the United Church of Christ’s 23rd General Synod passed a resolution, “A Call for a study on reparations for slavery.” Justice and Witness Ministries produced a discussion guide titled Financial Reparations: a Just Response to the Persistent Economic Effects of Slavery, Segregation, Discrimination, and Racism. This resource, developed in 2003, along with others, can inform discussions as we seek to advance the goal of the U.N. and our respective denominations through the development of additional resources to aid and encourage faith communities to engage in the difficult, but enriching sacred conversations on race.

Resources:

- UN International Decade for People of African Descent: <http://bit.ly/21WqAJa>
- A Call for a Study on Reparations for Slavery: <http://bit.ly/24NSo7w>
- Financial Reparations: a Just Response to the Persistent Economic Effects of Slavery, Segregation, Discrimination, and Racism: <http://bit.ly/1WpA9Ri>
- UCC Sacred Conversations on Race: <http://www.ucc.org/sacred-conversation>

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