

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
Washington, DC

February 28, 2023

Dear President Biden,

We – the undersigned faith leaders representing millions of people of faith from around the country – strongly urge you to issue an executive order to establish a Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans. The order should be based on the framework proposed in legislation including H.R. 40 and S. 40, which in the 117th Congress garnered 196 and 22 cosponsors, respectively. We encourage you to act quickly to establish the commission by Juneteenth, June 19, 2023, so that their work can be completed, and a report issued before the end of your first term.

Our faith traditions hold as central the essential worth of each person as having been created in the image of God. Our faith also teaches the importance of contrition and restoration when we commit acts of wrongdoing that denigrate others. In recent years, several faith communities have begun to examine their own complicity in slavery, oppression, and discrimination that has persisted for centuries. In living out their faith, they have acknowledged their own sins and sought to repair the harm done. For example, the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland has set up a reparations fund to provide grants to organizations working to uplift African American communities in the state. Numerous faith-based groups and denominations have also issued apologies for their role in slavery and recognized their continued role in maintaining systems of oppression. It is this belief and action that inspires our call to the larger society to grapple with the historical wrongs that continue to keep people of African descent from realizing their full human potential.

The United States has a notable record of demonstrating the courage to admit when its policies and actions have resulted in harm. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act to compensate victims of the US policy during World War II to place people of Japanese descent into internment camps. In 1993, Congress issued an apology for the US role in the overthrow of Hawaii's government a century earlier, in 1893, by US business interests with support from the Marines. In 1997, President Bill Clinton issued a formal apology for the atrocious medical "experiments" on Black men at the Tuskegee Institute. The time has come for our nation to examine the wrongs of slavery and segregation, as well as the lasting impacts of discrimination that has been the base upon which this country was founded and commit ourselves to doing the hard work to end ongoing racial discrimination.

The US cannot mend its political, economic, and social brokenness until it addresses its own transgressions against people of African descent. Only an honest and complete assessment of the harms done by the horrors of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and racial discrimination that provides for the restoration of those harmed will right the wrongs of the past that still haunt us today. Such an effort will call forth again what President Lincoln called the "better angels of our nature," enabling us to live up to the full promise of America -- liberty and justice for all.

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