

**MEETING NOTES: [Transforming systemic racism: Historical truth telling & reparations working group](#)**  
**Initial meeting/ conversations on the state of reparations organizing in Pittsburgh today**  
**Tues. Nov. 16: 12:00-1:30PM**

This initial meeting of the emergent World History Center Working Group on Historical truth-telling and reparations was meant to orient participants to the ongoing work in our community to address systemic racism and find ways to bring reparations for past and ongoing harms from slavery and the slave trade.

Organizers Khalid Raheem (Convener, Peoples' Campaign for Reparations and Black Self-Determination), Rev. Dr. Dale Snyder (Bethel AME Church), and Randall Taylor (Penn Plaza Support & Action Coalition, Stop the Station) shared some of the history of local work on "big picture" reparations that link with national and global campaigns and on more focused initiatives to address more recent and localized harms in regard to the demolition of Bethel AME church in 1958 and in ongoing displacement of Black residents due to the crisis of affordable housing and living-wage jobs.

Following their presentations on their organizing work and analyses of political context, organizers presented ideas for how members of the university communities in our region can contribute to the work of building a broad movement to support reparations and transform systemic racism. Among the suggestions for how this working group could contribute to this work were the following:

- **Research** to support particular reparations claims and investigate role of major institutions (i.e., banks and universities) profiting from slavery and the slave trade;
- **Community outreach** to help change public conversations and understandings of the legacies of slavery and intergenerational trauma as well as its effects in institutionalized racism and patterns of discrimination;
  - In particular, university members can help as "ambassadors" to white communities, which is critical to de-escalating today's highly polarized political context and helping open paths to transformative change.
- **Work in universities** to find where policies, histories, and practices benefit from the legacies of slavery and/or contribute to ongoing patterns of institutionalized racism, and develop strategies to end harmful practices, change institutionalized routines that produce these, and remedy harms.

**Summary of Meeting Details**

Khalid Raheem discussed work of the [People's Campaign for Reparations and Self-Determination](#), which has been organizing since 2017 to convene community forums on reparations and connect Pittsburgh with national campaign efforts. He stressed the campaign's radical vision in contrast to more modest visions for reparations as are seen in a growing number of cities today. The campaign is working towards reparations for slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration (including release of political prisoners), and it calls for self-determination/self-governance for Black people. It is conducting an online survey to assess how people are defining reparations, among other factors. The most common response so far is a demand for land, and there was discussion of how African Americans lost claims to land as they became involuntary migrants, fleeing racial violence in the U.S. south. The campaign organized a [public hearing on reparations](#) in October of 2019 to bring this issue to the city council. It works to connect local and national organizers with global movements and international laws/standards that support reparations.

Rev. Snyder discussed the history of Bethel AME, which was the oldest Black organization in the city, originally located in the lower Hill before being destroyed to make way for the Civic Arena in 1957. The

church was located adjacent to the Church of the Epiphany, a Roman Catholic and primarily white congregation that was spared. While the church was able to relocate, the congregation was not able to acquire space in the downtown area and many of its 3,000 members were displaced. More significantly, the many social support services the church and school provided were lost. Rev. Snyder and his congregation are seeking reparations to allow them to restore some of this social infrastructure to support Black residents, especially with early childhood programs, literacy programs, and affordable housing. They are also working with other congregations to look at how church endowments may have ties to slavery and the slave trade and how reparations for that might look. Actions being planned on this for Juneteenth 2022. He asked, “How can we package all this pain and trauma?” **Action:** The church is holding bi-weekly meetings, and two committees have been established: One that is working to tell the story of Bethel AME, working with archival records and oral histories. The other is working to help articulate demands for reparations, which would include legal and historical research.

Randall Taylor discussed the experiences of Penn Plaza residents and the campaign following the destruction of Penn Plaza and related developments/displacement in East Liberty. He pointed to the reality of mass displacement of Black Pittsburghers, and called for support for demands for the “right to return” by people displaced by Pittsburgh’s recent economic development policies and the “right to stay” for residents currently in what is only temporarily designated affordable housing. Between 2014-2018 more than 7000 Black residents were pushed out of the city. And the recent census data show a 13% decline in the Black population since 2010. The city must be confronted around its development policies, which have disproportionately disadvantaged Black residents, as well as around its police force, which has recruited very few Black officers, has more police per capita than comparable cities, and has continuing incidents of discrimination and violence/killing of Black residents (including 2 within the last month). The City has a long history of discrimination against its Black residents: it is now being sued over the misallocation of \$80-\$100 million in CDBG grants which were intended to help underserved communities, and recent allocations of federal Covid relief funds (ARPA) were made in a highly suspect and non-transparent way, favoring projects that did not serve those most impacted by the pandemic as was intended (See public testimony by [Pittsburghers for Public Transit](#)).

**ACTION:** The Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance is working with Randall to host a session at the 2022 [Pittsburgh Racial Justice Summit](#) on *How Can We Bring Pittsburgh’s Black Exiles Home?* The Summit is Jan. 21-22 2022 and will be online. Please help spread the word and encourage your students to attend.

### Points from discussion

- Key types of work we can contribute to this struggle are **research** (help with reconstructing histories and seeking historical and legal evidence to back claims); **community outreach** (education on *and off* campus, participation in local advocacy initiatives); and **work in universities** to find where policies, histories, and practices benefit from the legacies of slavery and/or contribute to ongoing patterns of institutionalized racism.
- University folks can help be “ambassadors to white communities” -as educators we can play a role in helping tell this history, publicly challenge the right-wing backlash, and empower students to demand justice.
- Financial institutions played a role in financing the slave trade—work can be done to document this and build claims around it (on this history, see Edward Baptist, *The Half has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*)
- Organizers stressed the need to distinguish *collective claims for reparations* from what government should already be providing for residents/taxpayers. While we need to be fighting

for both, reparations seeks accountability for past harms and their lasting impacts on the Black community.

- Khalid provided a useful conceptualization of three levels of reparations: 1) Large-scale/community level; 2) Organizational/agency; and 3) individual/family. This distinction can be helpful to our thinking and organizing.
- The story of Bethel AME shows how reparations must contribute to re-building the political capacity of Pittsburgh's Black community: the destruction of the Hill District and East Liberty not only displaced families but it also destroyed the social networks and organizations that were a foundation for community and political voice. Such institutions and the social supports they provide are not readily restored, but they are key to both health and political empowerment (See, e.g., M. Fullilove, *Root Shock* on the Hill District).
- **Youth and future generations:** There is a clear need for work with children and to address intergenerational trauma and support historical truth-telling (vs. the critical race theory backlash). Better support for early childhood education is needed in Pittsburgh and many other cities, and our city's highly unequal public school system must be changed. Preparing young people for a future of racial justice requires us to think about *what a society based on history of equitable and just relations among all people would look like, and what changes are needed to move us in that direction.*
- **Leadership is needed!** Drawing from past experiences, organizers asked: *Are we sincere? Are folks at the universities willing to take time and put energy into this work?* Will we step up and confront powerful forces to support this struggle? [**JS Note:** Our working group will need more leaders helping to do this.]

### **Background/news & Report links**

Public Source Story on Bethel AME: <https://www.publicsource.org/bethel-ame-black-church-history-racism-reparations-lower-hill-penguins/>

Summer 2021 United Nations Report on Police Killings—calls for all governments to make substantial efforts to address systemic racism and advance reparations: "[Agenda towards transformative change for racial justice and equality](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Racism/Pages/Call-Implementation-HRC-Resolution-43-1.aspx)" (A/HRC/47/53) <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Racism/Pages/Call-Implementation-HRC-Resolution-43-1.aspx>

Working Group Website: [Transforming systemic racism: Historical truth telling & reparations working group](#)

### **Campaign links**

<https://newafrikan.org/reparations>

Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance [Reparations Resource Guide](#):

[http://wiki.pghrights.mayfirst.org/index.php?title=Reparations\\_Resource\\_Guide](http://wiki.pghrights.mayfirst.org/index.php?title=Reparations_Resource_Guide)

### **Participant introductions** (From Zoom chat--Not complete list of attendees)

- Sarah Sanders: Currently a PhD candidate at Pitt Public Health, studying racial inequities in perinatal health care outcomes and access. Continually growing as an anti-racist accomplice since 2009!
- Ruth Mostern, professor of history at Pitt and director of the World History Center here. Also a member of the Organizing Committee of the Union of Pitt Faculty.

- Ali Straub - I am the World History Center Research Coordinator.
- Marcus Rediker, History.
- Daniel McClymonds: PhD candidate in sociology program. I do research on housing, racial inequality, urban renewal, and social movements in Pittsburgh's 20th century history.
- Jennifer Petrie-Wyman: Associate Director of Strategic Initiatives & Research Associate @ Pitt Business - I investigate racial justice and business/education both in the U.S. & Ghana, - conversations about reparations cross both of these
- Rev. Dr. Dale Snyder, Pastor of Bethel and Trinity AME Church, and Social Action Director For the The Third District AME Church Covering 275 Church in Ohio WV and Westren Pa.
- Jess FitzPatrick, director of the Digital Narrative & Interactive Design major, Lecturer in English, working in spatial theory (focusing on lived experience as design justice), world and local lit, and speculative fiction.
- Khalid Raheem, community organizer, activist: New Afrikan Independence Party (<https://newafrikan.org/>), Convener, Peoples' Campaign for Reparations and Black Self-Determination
- Nate Joseph, sociology graduate student at Pitt, broadly study people's movements for self-determination/liberation, with regard to this project looking into the process by which Pitt profited off of the displacement of public housing residents in Alequippa Terrace in the Hill District