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Dear Professor Achiume,

Thank you for this call for submissions on "Reparations, Racial Justice and Equality." As denominational staff from the United Church of Christ (USA) and The United Church of Canada, we are grateful for the opportunity to speak to a human rights approach to reparations and its role in bringing about racial justice, equality and wholeness.

Our ultimate Christian hope is the restoration of wholeness for all beings. Through war, colonization and slavery, we break the fundamental covenant of peace and love that is the foundation of creation. We understand reparations to be essential to the restoration of a broken trust. However, restoration of the relationship between peoples cannot take place if structures of domination remain in place, for it is these very structures that have led to broken relationships. Reparations must therefore shift the balance of power away from the one who has broken relationship. Even if the offending party seeks to repair the damage done to the offended party, the offender alone cannot restore a broken relationship. The wholeness of relationship asks both parties to come together to renew a covenant of trust. To restore the broken relationship, we must do more than simply compensate for injury. Rather, it is the agency of a people that must be made whole: the dignity of a people through the restoration of freedoms and rights, the identity of a people through the restoration of language, memory and cultural practices, and the rootedness of a people through spiritual communities of place.

The Hebrew Bible and New Testament traditions provide us with many examples of reparation. In the Hebrew Bible, the most vivid demonstration of reparation is found in the covenants God established with a collective group of people. The end purpose of these covenants is to restore and keep a "whole and peaceful" relationship with all creation. In the New Testament, the very act of God sending his/her son to be Immanuel among his/her creation is the ultimate demonstration of what reconciliation requires. The offended, in this case, demonstrated for the offender what it would take to meet the demands of reparation. For the offending creation of God, reparation begins with a change of heart, to "love God through demonstrations of justice, loving mercy and humility towards his/her creation." Practiced in this manner, reparation is not an act of charity, but of humility, justice and love.

This theological articulation must be heard as a prophetic voice from the Scriptures to religious institutions such as the United Church of Christ and The United Church of Canada, who are seeking complete and whole reconciliation with those whom the Church has offended. There is no doubt that the good intent of the Church needs to be recognized. Yet, this good intent can only lead to true reconciliation if religious institutions empty themselves of the claim to power (i.e., an act of kenosis as in Phil 2:5-11). The path to reconciliation begins by listening to the offended parties and intentionally working through the conditions of reparation that the offended parties have set out to make relations just and equal. Otherwise, declarations on racial justice and equality are nothing but wind-blown chaff. The question now is, "how ready are the United Church of Christ and The United Church of Canada to renounce privilege by submitting themselves to the offended, to listen to the offended, to understand the requirements of atonement, and to reparation not as charity but as the restoration of wholeness and peace?"



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Our scriptural memory is indeed a story of peoples who are oppressed, desolate and displaced seeking restoration. In contrast, our institutional memory is a story of people who have oppressed, deprived and displaced many peoples who are still imagined as inferior (because of race, language, culture, ability, gender identity to name a few) by the multiple mainline protestant Churches that became the United Church of Christ and The United Church of Canada. As Churches, we are only starting to recognize the ways that we have stolen the dignity, identity, and spiritual rootedness of peoples. We are wrestling with how we can best work towards our goal of wholeness for all people.

Even as the United Church of Christ and The United Church of Canada jointly present this submission, we have decided to highlight two areas of our ministries where we might use reparations as a step towards restoring wholeness. First, we have attached a testimonial of learning about the reconciliation work being done in The United Church of Canada from its Indigenous Ministries and Justice Circle. This brief summary provides an overview of how The United Church of Canada has provided compensation for our part in Indian Residential Schools, and surveys the racial inequality that challenges the realization of wholeness through reparations. A second testimonial of learning is a reflection from the staff members focused on racial justice within our faith communities, including our joint animation team for the UN Decade for Peoples of African Descent. This group shares insights on barriers we are facing to advancing reparations within our Church context.

As a whole, we recognize the desire of all peoples to be whole, and recognize the importance of our role in bringing this about. In particular, that through reparation:

1. Our religious institutions would recognize the harm that has been done to peoples victimized by racial injustice and inequality;
2. The reconciled relations between our religious institutions and the peoples these institutions have harmed would help restore language, memory and cultural practices;
3. And, last but not least, our desired reconciliation would also help to restore spiritual communities of place that are fundamental to a people.

We hope that these brief and incomplete reflections will be helpful as you generate your 2019 General Assembly Report. We recognize that this work is critical to our identity and work as a Church. Please know that your work is highly valued among us, and we welcome the opportunity to provide support.

Sincerely,

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Rev. Michael Blair, Executive Minister, Church in Mission, The United Church of Canada

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Learning from the United Church of Canada's Indigenous Ministries and Justice Circle

The United Church of Canada was formed in 1925 from Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist roots. Racial inequality has been a reality that has characterized these groups since their arrival in North America in the 1700s. The United Church of Canada was responsible, for example, for the operation of 15 residential schools from 1851 to 1969. These schools, operated for the Government of Canada by the Church, were part of a program designed to assimilate Indigenous children into dominant Canadian society, or, as it was said at the time, to “kill the Indian in the child.”

In 1985, members of the Indigenous Church challenged the United Church of Canada to apologize for its role in the colonization and the destruction of their culture and spirituality. The Church offered an apology in 1986, and while it was acknowledged, it has not been accepted – an indication that the journey from colonization to true partnership is a long one. The 1986 Apology was followed by a process of increasing self-determination by Indigenous peoples within the Church, albeit within a colonial structure. A self-determining Indigenous Church within The United Church of Canada will be formally launched in August 2019.

In 1998, the Church further apologized for its role in running residential schools, and in 2005, agreed to a legal settlement which provided former students with financial compensation for cultural loss, as well as for any physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse which had occurred at those schools. It was these losses and abuses that formed the basis for the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) to investigate this history and its legacy. The TRC's final report (2015) revealed a history of sustained, systemic abuse and concluded that the residential school system was a form of cultural genocide. In 2019, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls concluded that approximately 3000 deaths and disappearances over a 30-year period were part of this historical pattern of genocide.

However, these reports also demonstrate that racial inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada cannot simply be relegated to the past as a part of our history as a colonial nation; racial inequality remains embedded in government policies, which have been created in the interest of settlers, and which both fail to protect and negatively impact Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples' daily lives and rights to the benefits afforded all Canadians have been defined and limited by the Indian Act of 1867. Canada's wealth was achieved at the expense of Indigenous peoples who were dispossessed of their land and denied their rightful place at decision-making tables. Despite constitutional obligations, treaties and inherent rights have not been honoured. Furthermore, as a recent UN report demonstrates, Indigenous peoples are negatively impacted by the environmental racism connected to Canada's resource economy¹. In other words, colonization has come at tremendous cost to Indigenous peoples and to their way of life, a cost which persists today.

This reality should engender a conversation about: racial inequality in Canada; the power systems that continue to support it; its contemporary manifestations; and possible solutions, including the question of reparations. As Edgar Villanueva, author of *Decolonizing Wealth*, says:

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24678&LangID=E>

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We have to be honest about the sources of wealth and how wealth was accumulated in this country—a great part of it was on the backs of people of color, and now those communities are benefiting from just a very small percentage of dollars... Once you know, how can you not be equitable about how you're distributing the money?²

As a partner in the colonial project, as a Church that seeks to build relationships of mutuality, equity, and respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and in response to the urging of the Church's National Indigenous Council, we are beginning a conversation about reparations as a way towards reconciliation and racial justice. The Council's thinking on this has been shaped in part by the intent of the Dish With One Spoon wampum belt treaty. The dish represents the land; the guiding principles are to take only what you need, to always leave something in the dish for everyone else, and to keep the dish clean. This is a treaty that settlers have ignored in the quest for land and wealth.

What could reparations look like? The United Church already has some experience in this, including the return of traditional territory, and the sharing of wealth, for example, from shares in a resource extraction project on Indigenous land, or from sales of unused Church property. In an evaluation of the residential schools' legal agreement, a residential school survivor brought forward the teaching of *tlyahda* ("make it right"), the Haida process of conflict resolution/reparation wherein families meet with each other to sort out wrongdoing, make amends, and move forward. Former United Church of Canada Moderator Stan McKay (Cree) offered these thoughts to the National Indigenous Council:

It's obvious what injustice has been carried out in these institutions. Right now to me, it often feels in my community that reparation is often looked on as charity. There's no dignity, there's no recognition that it's about treaty, and reconciliation, and justice.

This is a discussion that Canada is reluctant to have. The findings of the TRC, and most recently, of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, have struck a chord of sympathy in many non-Indigenous Canadians, and this has contributed to building relationships of solidarity. Yet, these reports have also exposed deep-seated white privilege and colonial fragility. This is evidenced in mainstream media, the message of which precludes non-Indigenous people from recognizing and taking responsibility for the ongoing effects of colonization. Consequently, possible solutions that non-Indigenous Canadians feel could be too radical, or that may threaten settler self-interest, tend to be denied. Those who would be in the position of offering reparations often only see reparations through a financial lens, and are prone to seeing any perceived "gain" for Indigenous peoples as a "loss" to themselves.

These barriers to reparation—or even the discussion of it—also become barriers to reconciliation and to achieving racial justice. This is out of alignment with the Christian scriptures, which ought to guide our response to injustices such as the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Prime examples in the Old Testament are the stories of re-balancing wealth and power through Jubilee, or its echo in the New Testament story of Zacchaeus. We often question these scriptures in a way that we do not question other stories of our faith. Why? Because these scriptures, with their liberating possibilities for those who have been victimized by colonization, threaten the settler status quo.

² <https://www.decolonizingwealth.com/>

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This is the challenge that reparation offers to the achievement of racial justice. It is also the opportunity, finally, after hundreds of years, to dismantle ongoing structures of oppression and move towards equality in concrete, tangible ways. The question is not whether a jubilee happened in biblical times. It is whether we have the will to make it happen in ours.



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Learning from our Joint African Descent Faith Communities

The anti-racism statement³ of The United Church of Canada, which was adopted by the 37th General Council in 2000, notes that “We believe racism is a sin and violates God’s desire for humanity ... We believe racism is present in our society and in our Church, and throughout time has manifested itself in many forms in varying degrees.” This anti-racism policy also states that “as an institution within society, the Church has a responsibility to contribute leadership and advocacy towards overcoming racism ... As a community of believers we are called to live out God’s love in the world, to advocate for and with the oppressed, to model moral leadership and to seek justice for all people.”

Following the signing of the full communion agreement in 2015, the leadership of the United Church of Christ and The United Church of Canada identified a number of areas of work that the two communions could engage together as part of living into this agreement. The implementation committee that was established identified work on racial justice and right relationships with Indigenous peoples as a critical piece of common mission. Consequently, the committee proposed to the leadership table the option of engaging work around the United Nations (UN) International Decade for People of African Descent⁴.

A small working group was then created to explore the UN Decade and its implications for common mission; the leadership table asked this working group to develop a process for engaging this work as well as to organize the agenda for a spring 2018 meeting of United Church of Canada Conference Executive Secretaries and United Church of Christ Conference Ministers. The purpose of the meeting was to gather and learn of issues confronting Indigenous peoples and Black peoples, potentially to uncover a common way of understanding race and racism more deeply in our bi-national engagement.

In its general recommendation No. 34, the United Nation’s Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted:

racism and structural discrimination against people of African descent, rooted in the infamous regime of slavery, are evident in the situations of inequality affecting them and reflected, inter alia, in the following domains: their grouping, together with indigenous peoples, among the poorest of the poor; their low rate of participation and representation in political and institutional decision-making processes; additional difficulties they face in access to and completion and quality of education, which results in the transmission of poverty from generation to generation; inequality in access to the labour market; limited social recognition and valuation of their ethnic and cultural diversity; and a disproportionate presence in prison populations.

The realities faced by people of African descent—Black people—within Canada and the United States also parallel these global inequities.

³ The full anti-racism policy statement of The United Church of Canada is available by searching for “anti-racism” at <https://commons.united-church.ca>.

⁴ The United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent runs from 2015-2024. More information about the UN Decade can be found at: <http://www.un.org/en/events/africandescentdecade>.



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This was validated by a working group of the United Nations that visited Canada on October 17-21, 2016. They met with representatives from across the country and submitted a comprehensive report about anti-Black racism in Canada that included dozens of related recommendations. Their report was presented to the 36th session of the United Nations' Human Rights Council at its meeting in Geneva in September 2017. In their report, they linked Canada's history of enslavement, racial segregation, and marginalization to many of the current conditions faced by Black people in Canada. Across the country, Black people have disproportionately higher rates of poverty, poorer health, lower educational attainment, and are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

No one wants to overlook the roots of anti-Black racism as a systemic problem in Canadian society and even in religious institutions such as the United Church of Christ and The United Church of Canada. The issue of reparation, however, is still deafeningly quiet. The quieter it gets, the more it seems that any response to reparation will require a hard critique of the existing religious institutional system. This could very well mean confronting any volition in the system that is unwilling to make reparations and such volition is exerting power unlike the examples previously cited in the Scriptures. This is not an indictment but perhaps a call for just transparency, if indeed restoration of relations based on common theological and doctrinal beliefs on atonement and penance are to be experienced.

Currently, the joint working group on the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent, which is an expression of the full communion agreement between the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ (USA), seeks to engage both denominations in robust reflection, study, and action related to the UN International Decade. The working group also aims to continue building on the church's policies and statements, theological rationale, and contemporary manifestations that address anti-Black racism. The intent of the full communion between the denominations emphasizes an openness to cooperation in terms of witness, mission, worship, and the proclamation of a common faith. As such, the joint work on the UN International Decade would tangibly further this cooperation.



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Final Thoughts on Reparations from the Canadian context

Canada and the United Church of Canada both share a history of apologizing and making compensation for racial discrimination. In 1988, for example, Canada compensated Japanese Canadians who were placed in internment camps and whose property was seized during the Second World War. The United Church of Canada advocated for compensation at the time, and in 2009 made its own apology and in 2018 restitution for its role in Vancouver Japanese United Church's loss of its property. Similarly, in the 2000's Canada and The United Church of Canada apologized for and paid compensation to survivors of Indian Residential Schools (see brief above). It must be noted at this point the glaring lack of even an initial step towards a conversation on reparation concerning people of African descent.

Are apologies and compensation the same as reparation? Both these examples of compensation are referred to as "settlements," which does not really bring forth the definition of reparation as an act of repair and making—both of which imply ongoing relationship. As the World Council of Churches noted in a 2007 statement marking the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade:

Reparations go far beyond a financial figure; rather, reparations are about recognizing the wrong that has been done.... Reparations from both the church and society are needed, and these reparations are both praxis and prophetic - naming the wrongs that have been done is praxis or an action-reflection model; righting the wrongs, is a prophetic action. The process of reparations requires the restoration of relationships that affirm the dignity and humanity of all parties in order to repair what has been broken. Reparations also challenge the perpetrator to confession and repentance and ministers restoration and healing to those who have been exploited.⁵

As a Church, and as a nation, the challenge facing us is, how do we move beyond apology and compensation towards reparation and new relationships?

⁵ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities/racism/abolished-but-not-destroyed-slavery-in-the-21st-century>