History is made, and the United Church of Christ was part of it!

On Wednesday, April 14, 2021, the U.S. House of Representative's Judiciary Committee voted H.R. 40, “The Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act,” out of committee with a 25-17 straight party-line margin. The bill is now able to advance to a floor vote in the full U.S. House. Historic!

First introduced in 1989 by the late Congressman John Conyers, and now sponsored by Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, H.R. 40 acknowledges the fundamental injustice and inhumanity of slavery in the U.S. and sets up a commission to consider a national apology. The commission is also charged with studying proposals for reparations—both for the institution of slavery and the racial and economic discrimination against African Americans living today—and to make recommendations to Congress on proper remedies. The bill does not detail provisions for what reparations should look like but rather directs the commission to research and present such redress.

As Christians, we believe H.R. 40 is a necessary step on the road to reparations for African Americans living under the legacy of slavery, racial terrorism, economic exclusion and exploitation, and police brutality in the United States. Our tradition has a rich history of reparatory justice, from the prophetic witness in Isaiah 58 calling Israelites to be “repairers of the breach” to examples from Jesus’ ministry, like the repentance of Zacchaeus the tax collector, who affirms “I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount” (Luke 19:8-10).

We recognize that it is foolish and immoral to expect reconciliation with our black brothers and sisters without repentance and reparation. In order to move forward as a people, we need to do more than promote equity for our children; we need to repair the breach created by our ancestors and perpetuated by our own economic ways of being. The United Church of Christ has supported the study of reparations...
and reparatory justice proposals since 2001 when the General Synod passed, “A Call for A Study on Reparations for Slavery.”

Toward the goal of repair, there has been continuous leadership from the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC) and the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA), along with a secular legislative campaign entitled “Why We Can’t Wait” coordinated by the Human Rights Watch.

We are particularly encouraged by the solidarity of the Japanese American Citizens League and others in the Japanese community in support of H.R. 40. In 1980, Congress established the “Commission on Wartime Relocation and Interment of Civilians” to study the wrongful internment of Japanese Americans, U.S. citizens and permanent residents, during World War II. This led to the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which issued a formal apology to Japanese Americans and provided reparations in the form of compensation to survivors of internment and their families. The concept of reparations is not new to the federal government.

The H.R 40 bill is a historic chance for our nation to begin down the road of repentance for centuries of grave injustice created by chattel slavery and systemic oppression that were sown from the original sin of racism. You can join the effort by signing on to our faith coalition letter of support today! You can also help advocate through this social media toolkit, with graphics from Why We Can’t Wait, the United Church of Christ, and others.

We are unshakably committed to this journey as followers of a God of justice who teaches us that reconciliation must be rooted in material repentance. We stand by H.R. 40 and urge our congresspeople to join us in our commitment by supporting and sponsoring the bill. It’s past time this nation did what we know is right. The time for reparations is now. Let’s repair the breach.

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