



A RESOLUTION SUPPORTING REPARATIONS FOR BETHEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF PITTSBURGH

WHEREAS: Prophetic voices throughout the ages have called upon those in power to show justice to the those who have been “othered” and are the most vulnerable in society: the prophet Amos exhorted the people of Israel to “Hate evil and love good and establish justice. Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Racism is a scourge on our society, but more than that, as Hannah Arendt articulated, racism is the main ideological weapon of imperialistic politics;” and

WHEREAS: The gospel story is concerned with repairing the breach that is caused between people and communities. Repair, restoration, and recovery are central to the quest for reparations in addressing systemic and historic actions and practices that still negatively impact communities of color on social, economic, and political levels; and

WHEREAS: Reparations represents a repudiation of white supremacy, a disease, and a drag upon the Body Politic and Global Community. Reparations strikes at the very heart of the debilitating economic and social trajectories caused by the theft of land and other resources from Black people, creating decades long deserts of economic despair, miseducation, and broken communities; and

WHEREAS: As we work to repair our world, to transform racist systems, and encourage justice, we must visit, and learn about, the “bad times” of our history; addressing the impact of systemic racism and how it presently impacts the trajectory of communities of color. Mari Matsuda, in her treatment on reparations, “Look to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations,” says: “the need for reparations arises precisely because it takes nations so long to recognize the historical wrongs against those at the bottom. Reparation claims are based on continuing stigma and economic harm;” and

WHEREAS: In 1955 the Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority announced plans for the Lower Hill Project redevelopment the removal of “blight” from the community. This declaration included Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Pittsburgh. To its members then and now, “Big Bethel” as it was called was not a “blight.” It was a beacon of light, home for mentoring leaders, and a place where Black people of the time could feel the love and support of the community. Despite this, city council members determined that Bethel had “outlived its usefulness;” and

WHEREAS The Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority seized Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church through the use of eminent domain in 1957. In the wake of this taking a Civic arena was built which has presently evolved into the Paint Center which is now home to the Pittsburgh Penguins NHL team; and

WHEREAS: At the time of its taking, Bethel Church could seat 1,900 parishioners and community members in Pittsburgh’s thriving section of the Lower Hill District. Bethel AME Church is the oldest Black church in Pittsburgh; Bethel Church was taken while, the Church of the Epiphany, a predominantly white congregation and only 2 blocks away, was spared and continues to stand; and

WHEREAS: Bethel Church established the first elementary school for Black students in Pittsburgh and served as a haven for residents and the center for organizing in the 1950s during the civil rights movement; and

WHEREAS: Bethel initiated programs for before and after school needs, launched a Black Nurses Association to improve the health and welfare of its congregation and made significant social and political impact of the city of Pittsburgh and the African Methodist Episcopal Church; and

WHEREAS: Denominational and ecumenical leadership throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania have called for support of Bethel's reparations initiative regarding the unjust taking of their church in 1957 and an expansive program for the development of affordable housing, health care amenities and business opportunities to enhance opportunities for Black people on the Lower Hill of Pittsburgh; and

WHEREAS: No action taken by African Americans can unilaterally reduce the wealth gap between Black and white people. If the wealth gap is to be closed our nation must undergo a vast social transformation which includes bold national economic policies. It will also require partnerships between communities of color with political leadership and education and business sectors. This effort will also require ecumenical and interfaith engagement as we promote equitable policies that will enable reparative policies and opportunities; and

WHEREAS: . With Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church being forced to move to a smaller location that only serves 900 members it has found its growth to be stunted and its opportunities limited which has stultified opportunities for ministry and engagement; and

WHEREAS: The Mayor's Office of the City of Pittsburgh, the City Council of Pittsburgh, The Sports & Exhibition Authority of Pittsburgh, and Kevin Acklin, President of Business Operations Pittsburgh Penguins collectively negotiated the sale of 2.5 Acres of land to the FNB Bank Building Project for \$10.00 in 2021; this land is situated across from property which previously held old Big Bethel; and

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT

RESOLVED (1): The Pennsylvania Council of Churches encourages its member bodies to:

- Create and or seek adherence to denominational resolutions affirming reparations for historically oppressed people and communities.
- Provide educational materials and resources to their congregations to make them aware of, and to educate them about, the deleterious effect of historic restrictive covenants and urban renewal efforts on Black and Brown communities; and
- Encourage congregations and individuals to seek the enactment of legislation and policies that initiate the study reparations on statewide and national levels.
- Urge their partner churches, organizations, and judicatory leaders to support Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church's initiative, seeking reparations from the City of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Penguins; and be it further

RESOLVED (2): That the Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority publicly acknowledge the original injustice of using eminent domain to take the church; and be it further

RESOLVED (3): That the Mayor's Office of the City of Pittsburgh, the City Council of Pittsburgh, The Sports & Exhibition Authority of Pittsburgh, and Kevin Acklin, President of Business Operations Pittsburgh Penguins collective initiate the return of land and resources that were taken by eminent domain, to Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, inclusive of a calculation for damages to the church for loss of revenue, and revenue that has been generated by other parties over the past 65 years; and be it further

RESOLVED (4): That as the Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority negotiates new plans for the area, resolving the harm done to the Black residents and members of Bethel AME Church can take place through the return the land that was immorally and unlawfully taken; and be it further

RESOLVED (5) That copies of this resolution are to be shared with:

- Judicatory leadership and member churches of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches
- The Honorable Ed Gainey- Mayor of Pittsburgh
- Ms. Theresa Kail Smith- Council President-City of Pittsburgh
- Mr. Greg Flisram, Executive Director-The Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh
- Mr. Kevin Acklin, President of Business Operations Pittsburgh Penguins
- Mr. Aaron Waller, Executive Director of Pittsburgh Sports and Exhibition Authority

Approved by the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches on this 15th day of September 2022.

DocuSigned by:

Michael A. King

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The Rev. Dr. Michael King, President
Board of Directors
Pennsylvania Council of Churches-
Reparations for Bethel AME Church, Pittsburgh, Pa