

In some churches, talk of reparations draws a hearing

by [Jesse James DeConto](#)

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DURHAM, N.C. (RNS) A white scholar touring churches across the nation is trying to convince Christians that racial reconciliation is not enough—it's time to start talking about reparations for descendants of slaves.

And among mostly white, mainline Protestants this controversial—some would say unrealistic—notion is getting a hearing.

What divides the races in America is not the failure to embrace differences but the failure of white Americans to repent and repair the sins of the past, according to Drake University ethicist Jennifer Harvey.

"Our differences are not only skin deep," the 44-year-old scholar told a lecture hall packed with Duke Divinity School students recently. "Our differences are the deepest and most complex manifestations of genealogies of harm done to some and perpetrated by others. All over the Hebrew Bible, this is what it says to do when you steal—you give it back sevenfold."

Harvey's 2014 book, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*, has led to speaking engagements at United Church of Christ gatherings, Presbyterian assemblies and college campuses such as Duke and Colgate University in New York.

Over the next year, she'll address UCC statewide meetings in the Midwest, a Lutheran congregation in Arkansas, social justice conferences in Georgia and New Mexico, college students in Michigan and in Pennsylvania, and United Methodist and Disciples of Christ seminarians in New Jersey and Oklahoma.

The book "touched a nerve with a lot of religious leaders who care about this particular issue and who want to be prophetic in this moment," said Cameron

Trimble, executive director of the Center for Progressive Renewal

Trimble's center has published a video interview and a book-study guide to promote Harvey's book to its 13,000 affiliated congregations in nine different denominations.

"Jennifer is inviting a conversation that needs to be had among white people. In all of our mainline traditions, we have deeply institutionalized racism. We have to willingly give up power in order to equal the playing field."

On November 7, Harvey discussed the topic of reparations with members of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland.

More than 20 churches in the diocese have investigated their connections to slavery and produced an online historical tour, "Trail of Souls," as an act of truth-telling and confession.

"If we're not reconciled with our history, then we can't understand what the repair is that's needed," said Angela Shepherd, the diocesan canon for mission.

Shepherd said it's too late for the U.S. to consider any kind of direct reimbursement but welcomed Harvey's stoking the reparations movement in churches. She hopes Harvey's visit, along with the Baltimore protests in the spring, will help to motivate people in her diocese to support a bill first introduced by Michigan representative John Conyers in 1989 to create a federal commission to study reparations.

"It would not look like writing checks to individuals," Shepherd said. "To me, it's about figuring out a way in our country to bring up the playing field so that it is level."

Harvey's push for reparations comes on the heels of Ta-Nehisi Coates' story in the *Atlantic* magazine, "The Case for Reparations."

"White households are worth roughly 20 times as much as black households," wrote Coates. "Effectively, the black family in America is working without a safety net."

Coates traced some of the systemic injustices to "redlining," the denial of home mortgages to black Americans, driving them toward predatory lenders outside the banking system.

Harvey said this history, beginning in slavery and Jim Crow and continuing with poor, underfunded public schools for minority children, has stalled well-intentioned efforts at reconciliation since Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. This history also explains the energy around the Black Lives Matter response to recent acts of police brutality.

"I find myself surrounded by white Americans in a state of shock," Harvey said. "We should not be shocked or surprised. We have no right to surprise."

Harvey said she grew up attending mostly black schools in Denver, but it wasn't until she met black students at Union Theological Seminary that she began to understand how being white gave her societal power that they didn't have.

"Women and men of color said to me, 'You need to figure out your whiteness,'" she said.

Harvey said demands for reparations drove white Christians out of the civil rights movement. They held onto King's vision of the "beloved community" and kept talking about reconciliation but have never made the sort of recompense that's needed.

With a Ph.D. in Christian social ethics from Union, Harvey has spent her career writing on white supremacy and the contemporary reparations movement.

Harvey is ordained in the liberal American Baptist Churches USA. She supports Conyers' congressional bill and is trying to kindle the conversation in religious communities.

Harvey resists specifying what form reparations might take, saying that should come from the wounded parties. She points to the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, which calls for cash, land, economic development, scholarships, and policy changes ensuring equitable treatment in criminal justice, health care, and financial systems.

Harvey also suggests environmental reparations for Native American land taken and exploited; citizenship for underpaid immigrant workers; and political remedies for mass incarceration of black Americans.

"People who've been there, who lived through the civil rights movement, can look back and say, 'Yes, our churches are just as segregated as they were before,'" said

Michael DePue, director of Christian education at Chapel in the Pines, a white Presbyterian congregation in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where Harvey's book is being studied. "It's been 40 or 50 years, and the things that the civil rights movement set out to do, they haven't come to pass."

Trimble agreed.

"There's an awareness among progressive Christians that if you do what you've always done, you're going to get what you've always gotten," she said. "The challenge that remains before us is, will it move beyond talk? What we do very well in church is talk a thing to death."