

Episcopal seminary that benefited from slavery creates reparations fund

by [David Paulsen](#)

September 19, 2019



Aspinwall Hall at Virginia Theological Seminary (Photo by John W. Cross / Creative Commons)

Virginia Theological Seminary took what appears to be an unprecedented step by announcing that it has set aside \$1.7 million for a slavery reparations fund—something considered but not yet enacted by other institutions of higher education that historically benefited from slave labor.

Enslaved African Americans worked on the Alexandria-based campus, which was founded in 1823, and at least one building was built with slave labor. Black students were excluded from attending the Episcopal seminary until the 1950s.

“As we seek to mark [the] seminary’s milestone of 200 years, we do so conscious that our past is a mixture of sin as well as grace,” VTS dean Ian Markham said in a press release. “This is the seminary recognizing that along with repentance for past sins, there is also a need for action.”

Income from the endowment fund for reparations will be put to use in a variety of ways, from encouraging more African American clergy in the Episcopal Church to directly serving the needs of any descendants of the enslaved Africans who worked at the seminary.

The seminary's announcement comes amid a growing national conversation over reparations as one way to atone for the American systems of slavery and segregation, rooted in the colonial era with continued effects on society today. While Democratic presidential candidates have been asked for their views on the subject this year, Episcopal Church leaders have taken a lead in speaking in favor of reparations, most recently Maryland bishop Eugene Sutton.

"Everyone living in our great nation has inherited a mess created by the institution of slavery," Sutton testified in June at a congressional hearing on reparations. "None of us caused this brokenness, but all of us have a moral responsibility to fix it."

Speaking a month after his diocesan convention approved a racial reconciliation resolution that raised the prospect of reparations, Sutton noted in his testimony that reparations are not simply about monetary compensation but rather repairing what is broken. "An act of reparation is an attempt to make whole again, to restore, to offer atonement, to make amends, to reconcile for a wrong or injury."

The issue has been particularly active in the academic world, with numerous colleges and universities founded before the Civil War grappling with their own histories of racial injustice. More than 50 of them have joined a coalition called Universities Studying Slavery to research that history.

Students at Georgetown University have pushed a measure that would raise a reparations fund at the Jesuit university in Washington by adding a fee to students' tuition bills. Georgetown is a prominent case because of its own research into the 272 campus-owned slaves who were sold in 1838 to save the school from closure.

According to the press release, VTS's Office of Multicultural Ministries will administer the seminary's fund "as part of our commitment to recognizing the racism in our past and working toward healing and reconciliation in the future."

"Though no amount of money could ever truly compensate for slavery, the commitment of these financial resources means that the institution's attitude of repentance is being supported by actions of repentance that can have a significant

impact both on the recipients of the funds, as well as on those at VTS,” said Joseph Thompson, director of VTS’s Office of Multicultural Ministries.

Thompson, in an interview with Episcopal News Service, said the seminary expected to be able to spend about \$70,000 a year from endowment income. The seminary has engaged in racial reconciliation efforts for a while, he said, but those efforts took a big step forward about ten years ago when Dean Markham issued a public apology for the seminary’s complicity in slavery.

The Diocese of Maryland, under Sutton, has been a church-wide leader in identifying its congregations’ ties to slavery, through its Trail of Souls research project and pilgrimages. And in 2016, a reparations resolution at its diocesan convention, though not approved, advanced that conversation in the diocese.

Three years later, at Maryland’s 2019 convention, Sutton read a pastoral letter that called on his diocese to again consider what reparations might look like.

“The subject of reparations is mired in emotion,” he said. “It is often mischaracterized and certainly largely misunderstood. It is a complex issue that involves economic, political, and sociological dimensions that are difficult to grasp without a willingness to engage more deeply than having a quick emotional response to the word.”

Sutton also cautioned that the church sees this issue from the perspective of faith, not politics. His subsequent congressional testimony, however, and his follow-up interview with Fox News’ Tucker Carlson sparked a conservative backlash that Sutton acknowledged in a message to his diocese.

Critics sent him “hate-filled messages” that questioned his integrity, sanity, and faith, Sutton said. That response was expected, he said, but it shouldn’t deter him, the diocese, or the country from facing the truth of its past.

“We came to the decision to affirm the principle of moving forward with some form of accounting for how we gained materially and financially from an evil institution,” Sutton said. “If our diverse diocese can come together on this issue in such a respectful way, then let’s not give up on the notion that our nation can do the same.” —Episcopal News Service