

100 years later, Black church leaders seek reparations for Tulsa massacre

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [June 16, 2021](#) issue



Robert R.A. Turner (center) draws attention to the 1921 Tulsa massacre every week in Tulsa, Oklahoma. (Courtesy photo)

On the first Wednesday in May, as the centennial of the Tulsa massacre approached, Robert R. A. Turner stood outside Tulsa City Hall with his megaphone, as he does every week.

"Tulsa, you will reap what you sow, and that which you have done unto the least of these my children, Jesus said, you have done also unto me," said Turner, 38, the pastor of Historic Vernon African Methodist Episcopal Church. "We come here to say, for your own benefit, you ought to do reparations not tomorrow, not even next week, not next month, not next year, but we demand reparations now!"

Vernon AME is one of the plaintiffs in a suit filed in September 2020 that calls for the city of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and other defendants to pay reparations to relatives of victims and survivors of the May 31, 1921, massacre that destroyed a part of town known as Black Wall Street.

The massacre began when false rumors spread through the city that a young Black man had assaulted a White female elevator operator. Within about 16 hours, a White mob had killed an estimated 300 Black people and destroyed thousands of homes, businesses, and churches.

As Tulsa marked the somber centenary in its Greenwood district, where Black Wall Street was located, Turner and other Black people of faith were among those saying the time has come to repay along with remembering.

Among the suit's petitions to the Tulsa County District Court are payments to descendants of those who were killed, injured, or displaced by the massacre; development of educational and mental health programs for individuals and organizations in Greenwood and North Tulsa; and a scholarship program for massacre descendants for postsecondary education in Oklahoma.

The suit states that Vernon AME, "founded in 1905, is the only standing Black-owned structure from the Historic Black Wall Street era and the only edifice that remains from the Massacre. Vernon's sanctuary burned in the Massacre. The basement was the only part of the red brick building that remained."

The church joins other plaintiffs in charging that they never received resources to recover from the trauma and damage of the massacre.

The city, responding in court documents to the suit, questioned the framing of its claims and the idea that the city's current problems can be attributed to 100-year-old wrongs.

"At its base level, Plaintiffs are attempting to seek reparations for the events of June 1921 while working around the inherent statute of limitations problems that have thwarted other lawsuits bringing similar claims," the city argued.

In 2001, the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 called for reparations for the massacre, including payment to survivors and descendants, a scholarship fund, establishment of an economic development zone in the historic

area, and a memorial for reburial of remains of victims found in unmarked graves.

Turner, who arrived in the city in 2017 to lead his church, agrees with all of the commission's recommendations and hopes for a full criminal investigation. His petition for reparations has been signed by more than 26,000 people.

"This is about sin and an abominable sin—racism," said the minister, who calls the massacre a "genocide of people simply because of the color of their skin."

Gregory Thompson, coauthor of *Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair*, said the Tulsans' demands show how the movement for reparations has extended beyond atonement for US involvement in slavery to repairing societal ills and that not just the federal government but local and regional officials are being called to account.

"It's not to say that I don't think the federal government should be involved—I do," said Thompson. "But I think community-based reparations allow African American leaders a lot more agency in this conversation than if it's located at the federal government, which is not equitably representative of African Americans."

Regional reparations initiatives have become more common of late.

In March, the Evanston City Council, in Illinois, began approving reparations that provide mortgage and other housing assistance to local Black residents to make amends for racially discriminatory housing practices. In April, Virginia governor Ralph Northam signed a bill mandating that five of the state's older public universities pay for scholarships or community redevelopment programs, starting in 2022, to benefit descendants of enslaved workers who built them.

Annette Gathron, board chair of Christ Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church—a congregation that lost its original building in the massacre—said she intends to keep younger members of her family aware of the history of the city where she has lived for more than 60 years.

"I think that it's good that we are remembering, and I plan to take my great-grands to some of this so they can understand the struggles that we have had," she said.

She traditionally takes nieces and nephews visiting from across the country on a walking tour through historic Greenwood, including a stop at Vernon AME.

“I think it’s important for them to know that they can achieve—because this, at one time, was a very thriving community.” —Religion News Service