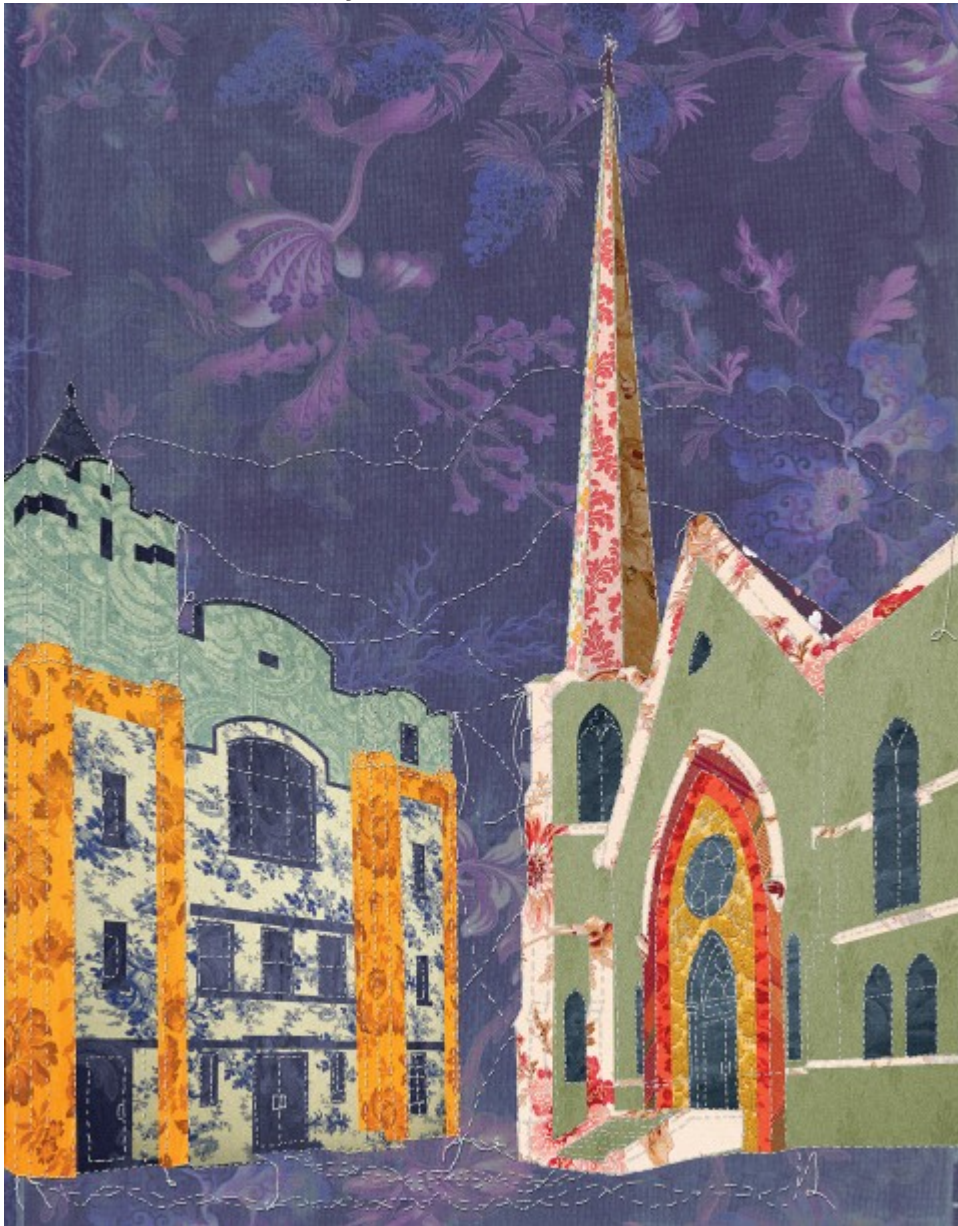


Repairing the redlined body of Christ

My church wanted to participate in our city's reparations efforts. We began in our archives.

by [Michael Woolf](#) in the [March 2024](#) issue

Published on February 21, 2024



(*Century* illustration by Daniel Richardson)

In the basement of the church I pastor is a room with a dehumidifier that is always running. The archive room is not glamorous, but through the patient work of volunteers the voluminous, sometimes difficult history of my congregation has been organized into easy-to-find folders. Inside you will find pew rental records, newsletters, photographs, correspondence, and much more. You will find the record of a congregation that has a wound at its center: in 1882, the Black members of First Baptist Church in Evanston, Illinois, left to form Second Baptist Church. There they found safe harbor from the White supremacy that had relegated them to my church's balcony and asked them to contribute to the construction of buildings that were built by them but never for them. You will also find a history of a congregation alternately avoiding that wound and seeking redemption.

My congregation has been aware of this wound for some time, but when Robin Rue Simmons, then an alderwoman, proposed the nation's first-of-its-kind municipal reparations program in Evanston, archival exploration of this wound took on a new urgency. As a congregation, we saw firsthand how our city was being called to address the harms that it had caused, and we knew that the story of our congregation was part of those harms. Simply put, the archives of the city and its churches have provided something that no single person can: a key to the past. If there is one thing that we learned in Evanston, it's that reparations are impossible without knowing history—and that history is unknowable without the raw material used to make coherent accounts. The archives are critical.

There's no clearer place to see this in action than in the color-coded maps, produced in the 1930s by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, that ranked neighborhoods based on investment quality from "best" to "hazardous." Regardless of how popular a neighborhood was, Black neighborhoods were always ranked as hazardous, a designation that painted that neighborhood red on the map. That is where the term "redlining"—which refers to the systematic refusal of loans, insurance, and other services to people residing in those neighborhoods the HOLC deemed to be hazardous—comes from. Because the primary way that American families build wealth is through homeownership, the maps authorized by the federal government have served to systematically steal wealth from Black Americans. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, the average White household now has six times the wealth of the average Black household, a reality rooted in homeownership and the denial of it.

Showing contemporary White Evanstonians these maps generally draws one of two reactions: intense quiet or a gasp. It's one thing to know intellectually that Evanston was and is segregated; it's quite another to see it laid out so plainly in vibrant color. In a place that is still half-jokingly referred to as "Heavenston," such documents put to rest the notion of Evanston as a blameless idyll of progressivism.

But these maps are not only views into the past; they can also become the building blocks for constructing a theology that wrestles profoundly with the present, even if that wrestling means that White churches will have to do some serious soul-searching. The problem is, how can that theology be developed in churches that were part of the White supremacy that caused the harm in the first place? Is it possible to reckon with the ways that churches have benefited from and participated in redlining? If there's a hope that those questions can be answered, it rests in the archives.

The thing about archives is they do not lie. White churches often construct histories about themselves that studiously avoid race, but the archives are still there, waiting to be explored anew and used as the foundation for new theologies of redemption and reconciliation.

That is precisely what happened in the 1990s, when members of Lake Street Church of Evanston—formerly First Baptist—began to learn more about the founding of their church and realized that race was at the center of that story. They turned to the archives and saw for themselves the evidence of how the congregation became majority White. At the same time, Second Baptist had also begun exploring its archives. Now the two churches have begun using their archives to chart a course of reparations between them.

In the archive room at my church, you can touch a photo of Nathan Branch, a central figure in this story. Born an enslaved person in Virginia, he joined the Union army during the Civil War and eventually settled in Evanston. One story in particular captures the imagination. During worship one Sunday, the floor of the church caved in, and Branch jumped out the window to save himself. Later that day, he returned with money to repair the damaged window.

This took place in a church where Black people had been relegated to the balcony. They were welcomed as full members of the church in theory, but in practice what my tradition calls the "right hand of fellowship" only extended so far.

In 1882, the Black members asked for letters of dismissal from First Baptist and went on to form Second Baptist. They certainly left because of racism and White supremacy at First Baptist, but that is not the entire story. They also sought to form independent Black institutions. In the late 19th century, the Black population of Evanston was growing by leaps and bounds, and there was a need for new institutions to meet their needs—something First Baptist was ill-equipped for and uninterested in doing.

The churches remained cordial throughout the years, and some pastors formed dynamic duos to address issues in Evanston. But somewhere along the way the story of the departure of First Baptist's Black members was forgotten by White Evanstonians—until the 1990s, when the congregation realized that the memory of these events lived on at Second Baptist. So alive was the memory that Second Baptist had put on a play based on the events, called *The Spiritual Revolt of Nathan Branch*.

In response to that knowledge, First Baptist began to research its own history and organize its archives. It searched for the reason this rupture occurred and began for the first time to talk about racism in the congregation. Over the course of several years of internal discernment, the church presented a declaration to Second Baptist that outlined its grief at the racism that caused a rupture between the two congregations and offered an unequivocal apology. Without the archives, such an act would have been impossible, but there the records were, waiting to be discovered.

The relationship between the two congregations has had its ups and downs, but in 2018, the churches became sister churches with a shared goal: eradicating racism in Evanston. That movement toward one another was rooted in the belief that in many ways, the relationship between the two churches is a microcosm of the city, where Black and White residents have been torn apart by over a century of racism and White supremacy. It was also built on the firm foundation that, through Christ, reconciliation is possible.

But reconciliation cannot come without wrestling with the wound at the center of the relationship. Otherwise, it becomes what Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed cheap grace. Reparations, when practiced correctly, are one way to reach for the other end of that spectrum and try to attain costly grace instead. That is why, in 2022, our two churches began exploring how to restore Second Baptist to co-ownership of our

building.

Working collaboratively with Second Baptist, we arrived at this idea because the building was the site of profound trauma. Lake Street Church is the oldest public building in Evanston, and the sanctuary remains almost the same as the day it was built. When I preach in the ornate but not-too-lofty pulpit, I look up into the same balcony where the Black members of First Baptist were once forced to sit. The building is a site of memory—it contains wounds.

It's also the place where the congregation's wealth resides. Lake Street is not a wealthy congregation, but we do have a beautiful property in a prime location that is worth a considerable sum. Part of our journey has been in realizing that the wealth we have acquired is based in White supremacy—and that we have benefited immensely from the very same harms that are now being addressed by the city's reparations program.

The same is true of many church buildings, which have often played sometimes silent roles in the building and remaking of neighborhoods. This is especially true with regard to gentrification and urban renewal, where churches have sometimes pushed for redevelopment at the expense of Black homes and businesses. In Evanston, the Black community is being pushed out of the city by those same forces. In 2000, Black Evanstonians made up 22.5 percent of the population; now they number about 17 percent.

The promise of the archives is not that they keep us pointed toward the past but that they provide the means for understanding just what repair and reconciliation might look like. Evanston has sought to address the ways that it has deprived Black residents of equal opportunities by setting aside \$10 million to fund projects focused on housing and economic development, which were the priorities outlined at town hall meetings in Evanston's Black community. Having been deemed eligible as either a victim or a descendant of a victim of housing discrimination perpetuated by city codes from 1919 to 1969, and currently residing in Evanston, to date some 16 Black residents have received \$25,000 payments, with more than 100 residents on a waiting list. When this project began, it was uncertain how many would be eligible, but experience has proven that more Evanstonians continue to be harmed by those discriminatory codes than first realized.

The parameters of this first reparations initiative are important, because 1919 to 1969 are the dates for which there is undeniable proof that the City of Evanston's zoning regulations discriminated against Black community members by forcing them to live in Evanston's Fifth Ward. Without the archives and those multicolored maps, as well as oral histories like the one of a house being physically moved from another part of town to the Fifth Ward, reparations and reconciliation would be impossible. After all, you cannot atone for what you do not know.

That is not to say that everyone in Evanston is supportive of the city's reparations effort. Some of its most insightful critics come from Evanston's Black community. In fact, the only no vote on establishing reparations came from a prominent Black alderwoman, who argued that it was "reparations in name only." Both proponents and opponents of the reparations program agree that it does not do enough to redress the pain and damage caused by White supremacy. The debates over whether the city's response is sufficient ought to be seen as different viewpoints about the possibility and means of reparations.

Churches have immense resources when it comes to practicing reparations. They are institutions that stretch beyond any individual's lifetime, and that means that they likely have records of the past that can demonstrate concretely the ways that they have benefited from, suffered from, or perpetuated White supremacy. They also possess buildings which stand the test of time and where immense wealth is stored. And yet, buildings are sources of anxiety for many houses of worship in this country. As religious attendance declines, there are worries about whether communities of faith can stay in their buildings. Reparations can change that calculus and instead push White congregations to ask tough questions about how they are stewarding these resources. Put another way, buildings are immense resources for repair, but that repair will not come without cost. If the archives show that our sanctuaries are redlined just like our communities, then churches will need to be a part of the conversation in their communities about what repair looks like.

The move to restore Second Baptist to co-ownership was not without controversy. I have had many nice, White people yell at me in my office, but those same vocal critics have also experienced conversion. Many of them are now some of the most ardent supporters of the project. One of them told me that she realized that we are not "giving away our church so much as we are sharing its future."

For several decades Lake Street has been committed to interfaith dialogue. When you attend a worship service, you will almost always have a reading from another tradition paired with a text from the Bible. We have also benefited immensely from our interfaith relationships in Evanston, where two Jewish congregations have given the local churches a gift of grounding reparations in that tradition. There is one passage of Talmud in particular that resonates:

The mishna teaches that Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Gudgeda further testified about a stolen beam that was already built into a building and said that the injured party receives the value of the beam but not the beam itself. With regard to this, the Sages taught in a baraita (Tosefta, Bava Kamma 10:5): If one robbed another of a beam and built it into a building, Beit Shammai say: He must destroy the entire building and return the beam to its owners.

Rabbi Sharon Brous, when speaking of this passage, puts it this way: “Our country was built on a stolen beam. More accurately, several million stolen beams. Only they weren’t beams. They were human beings. The palace they built was magnificent, but they have never been compensated for their labor.”

What often occurs in our national and local discourse is to deny that the beam was ever stolen in the first place, or to say that there is no way to compensate for the stolen lives and labor that built this country. As Ta-Nehisi Coates put it, to believe that reparations is not a necessary part of ending White supremacy is “to believe that a robbery spanning generations could somehow be ameliorated while never acknowledging the scope of the crime and never making recompense.” To deny the importance of reparations is to deny that the beam that our house is built on is stolen.

A look at the archives reveals that many White houses of worship are built on stolen beams. The only question is what we are to do with this information. Churches can become resources for thinking about repair, but that will require more than a cursory acknowledgment of problematic history—it will look like lament and action.

If the body of Christ is redlined, then the reparations movement pushes us to ask what the resurrection might look like. What luminous body could rise from the death of White supremacy? One thing is certain: whatever is raised from the dead will not look like the past. The risen Christ’s appearance was changed. The only way to

experience that vision of the resurrection is through understanding the crucifixion that has taken place in our communities—and through a commitment that the future must look different.