



Interwoven Congregations™

Quarterly

Issue 8: May 2023

Helping faith communities be agents for racial justice and healing.

From the Editor

Educating ourselves about racism, check. Building relationships across the divide of race, check (sort of). But where efforts often stall is in tackling systemic racism — the wealth gap, mass incarceration, hiring discrimination, etc. These challenges can seem overwhelming. Where do we even start? This has led us to dedicate a 4-part series in the Quarterly to *Doing Racial Justice*. We begin where this work may start: the apology. Is it needed, or is it just a waste of time? And is there such a thing as a good or a bad apology?

We are grateful to all of the contributors to this series and welcome joining hands with you, our readers, in *Doing* racial justice!

- Pat Jackson

In this Issue:

The Contributors.....	2
Part I: The Apology.....	3
The Full Series Lineup.....	8
The Apologies List.....	12
3 Steps You Can Take.....	20

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The Series: *Doing* Racial Justice

Part I: The

APOLOGY

Question: Is an apology for slavery and Jim Crow necessary for racial justice and healing, or just a waste of time?

My feelings about the apology are complicated -- they sit uncomfortably and hopefully within me simultaneously. — Rev. Jermaine Ross-Allam



I would take...the apology in the ... context of *teshuvah* — the Jewish conception of repentance where apology is necessary any time that there is to be healing or repair. — Rabbi Jonah Pesner

Are you going to issue an apology and put it under a barrel? Or are you going to turn it into an opportunity to engage? — Willye Bryan



I think what is necessary is accountability. — Woullard Lett

The challenge with apologies is, first of all, that both the nation and the church either are unaware or they're in denial of what they're actually apologizing for. — Mark Charles



The individual apology is important, but how are you living into it? What changes are you making? — Rev. Peter Schell-Jarrett

The apology is really important for people who've been impacted because they're like, "Oh my gosh, I've finally been heard." — Jennifer Roberts



An apology that is uttered without action behind it means nothing. — Dr. Rodney Sadler

When you know the government [and church] was responsible for horrible deeds, put it in the light." — Rev. Jeroen Sijtsma



Meet the Contributors to Part I: The Apology



Willye Bryan

Founder of the [Justice League of Greater Lansing, MI](#) and elder at

First Presbyterian Church of Lansing, Michigan. Willye highlights what an apology can DO, but only if it isn't hid under a barrel. She describes taking one denomination's apology into the Black community and backing it up with action. (p. 3)



Mark Charles

[Native American activist](#), co-author of [Unsettling Truths, the Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery](#).

Mark, a 2020 U.S. presidential candidate, challenges the idea that the country and the church are even able to apologize, and calls the nation into a time of lament and search for common memory. (p.3)



Rev. Peter Jarrett-Schell

[Rector](#) of Calvary Episcopal Church, Chair of the Reparations Task Force for the [Episcopal Diocese of Washington](#), author of [Reparations, A Plan for Churches](#).

Peter examines the marks of a "good apology" and the need for individual congregations and members to actively share in it. (p. 3)



Woullard Lett

National Co-Chair of [N'COBRA](#), the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America and Leadership Ministry Associate of the [Unitarian Universalist Association](#) ("UUA").

Woullard details the UUA's approach to the apology and racial justice, and challenges the common conception of race, comparing it to 17th century views of witchcraft. (p. 4)



Rabbi Jonah Pesner

The Executive Director of the [Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism](#) and Sr. Vice President for [Union of Reform Judaism](#).

Jonah examines the apology through the Jewish ethic of repentance and the opportunity to center people of color who are Jewish in this discussion. (p. 4)



The Hon. Jennifer Roberts

Former mayor of Charlotte, NC (2015-17) and Co-Founder of the [Reimagining America Project](#) ("RAP").

Jennifer speaks about her own experience of offering an apology during a RAP hearing where she acknowledged her own blindness to environmental racism, but affirms a path forward. (p. 5)



Rev. Jermaine Ross-Allam

Director of the newly established [Center for the Repair of Historic Harms](#) of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Jermaine describes how his own views of the apology were transformed by witnessing a public apology, but also challenges people of faith with "our own atheism" that denies the justice that God makes possible. (p.5)



Rev. Dr. Rodney Sadler

Director of the [Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation](#) and Associate Professor of Bible at [Union Presbyterian Seminary](#), and Co-Founder of the [Reimagining America Project](#).

Rodney probes, theologically, the risks and promise of the apology as well as the idea of reconciliation. (p. 5)



Rev. Jeroen Sytsma

Pastor of [Koningskerk](#) in Zwolle, the Netherlands. Racial justice is a global concern, so we add this international dimension to the Quarterly.

Rev. Sytsma's church hosted a forum on April 12th to examine the legacy of the Dutch church and slavery. The Dutch government officially apologized for slavery in December. (p. 6)



Willye Bryan: The apology is really very important, especially given the enormity of what we're talking about. When I get this question, I always use a real and simple analogy.

If you walked by someone and stepped on their foot, you would turn back and say, "Oh, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?" Then there's the enormity of having 246 years of enslavement which was certainly a wrong and caused harm. In my presentations I talk about slavery, emancipation with no compensation. I talk about Homestead Acts which were opportunities for white people to gain, and how if these opportunities had been equally given to African Americans, we would not be in the situation we are in. I talk about Jim Crow, segregation, red-lining, the GI Bill, mass incarceration, to name just a few of the impediments to wealth for African Americans, and for which the country needs to apologize. *(continues on p. 9)*



Rev. Peter Jarret-Schell: I think the apology and reparations are both necessary but insufficient. I think in religious spaces we're always looking for this panacea. I wonder if it has something to do with the way we talk about the atonement -- that there's *this one thing* that did it, so we're looking for that in the same way with racial justice. But these problems of injustice are colossal messes, and if we're serious about it, we have to accept that any legitimate solutions are also going to be messy, imperfect and complicated.

I think the apology is absolutely necessary for a couple of reasons. Number one: there is simply the fact of making the acknowledgment and recognizing the history. For people who carry this history, culturally, personally, one of the most painful pieces is this constant state of erasure or dismissal. Also, it's necessary in doing the work of justice, it's like a process of diagnosis.

(continues on p. 10)

Part I — The Question:

Is an apology for slavery and Jim Crow necessary for racial justice and healing, or just a waste of time?



Mark Charles: The challenge with apologies is, first of all, that both the nation and the church either are unaware or they're in denial of what they're actually apologizing for. So they don't understand the history and the extent of what their apology is trying to cover. Because of that, their apologies are very weak, but they're also very self-protecting. I just said this to a colleague today about the [repudiation given by the Vatican](#) two weeks ago [about the Doctrine of Discovery] and I've said this numerous times about the apology given by the [US Congress in 2009](#) [to Native Americans]: If you're a parent and your child hurt somebody intentionally, or even unintentionally,

and they gave an apology like the US Congress or the Vatican gave, as a parent, you would stop your child, turn them around, and say "No, you go back and apologize again. You need to be more specific, and you need to take ownership of what you've done or what you neglected to do, and you need to be more connected with what you're apologizing for." And so I argue right now that both the United States of America and the church are in no position to offer a sincere, meaningful apology, because they are either in denial of or unaware of what they've actually done. And so my biggest effort is directed towards what I frequently refer to as creating common memory, which is teaching the history.

(continues on p. 13)

Part I — The Question: Is an apology for slavery and Jim Crow necessary for racial justice and healing, or just a waste of time?



Woullard Lett: N'COBRA is a coalition of organizations and individuals started in 1987 whose mission is to win full repair, reparations, for the descendants of Africans enslaved in

the U.S. -- full stop. I would say personally, and I think that N'COBRA policy would agree, that the apology is necessary but insufficient. There are any number of elements involved in order to have full repair. So an apology is an acknowledgement. But then we have to have accountability, which is the repair, and the reparation for the harm done. Then we can reach atonement and reconciliation. So acknowledgment, accountability and atonement.

ICQ*: Have Unitarian Universalists as a denomination issued an apology for slavery and Jim Crow?

Woullard: [Unitarian Universalists](#) are not a denomination, they are an association. So the congregations decide what happens and not some central headquarters. The Association has not issued an apology but in 2017 they [declared the intention](#) to eliminate white supremacy culture from the Unitarian Universalism tradition.

ICQ: Do you think the UUA should offer an apology, or do you think it's not necessary?

Woullard: I think what is necessary is accountability. The Association has taken steps to effectively include marginalized communities. The Association made a \$5 million commitment to an organization that serves UU's of African descent called [Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism](#). They also support an affiliate organization called [DRUUMM](#) -- Diverse & Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries. So they put their money where their mouth is to make a demonstrated attempt to

(continues on p. 16)



Rabbi Jonah Pesner: The Religious Action Center is the political and social justice entity of the Union for Reform Judaism ("URJ"). I would take the question of the apology in

both the broader context of the reparations movement and *teshuvah*, which is the Jewish conception of repentance, literally meaning 'return.' In Judaism we don't really have sin; we have a notion of 'missing the mark.' And so the idea is that "Well, you may have been well-intentioned but you missed, and so how do we return?" If I've committed a transgression, apology and accountability are necessary for there to be return and healing.

Then we have the enslavement of African people and 400 years of that evolving into the terror of Jim Crow and systemic racism, which maintains itself in the form of everything from voter suppression to mass incarceration and now the assault on [CRT](#). There was the awakening from George Floyd's lynching and now the backlash against that to maintain, frankly, in my opinion, white supremacy,

"There's no antisemitism in wokeness and people don't know the origin of that term." — Rabbi Jonah Pesner

the last gasps of the confederacy and white people who don't want to acknowledge the ways we benefit from privilege. Then we turn our own awakening on ourselves and call it "wokeness;" and this shows up in the Jewish community. There are all these folks who want to peel Jews off from the antiracism movement by calling "woke" antisemitic.

(continues on p. 17)



Rev. Jermaine Ross-Allam: I was invited in January to be [a part of an official apology](#) organized by Rev. Stanley Jenkins, Willye Bran and Prince Solace from First Presbyterian

Church in Lansing, MI. They led a group of Presbyterian clergy to [Reachout Christian Center Church](#) to deliver the apology that was approved by the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly in June 2022 to community members and multiple clergy of non-Presbyterian African American churches. My experience there is a very formative part of how I understand these apologies.

The apology was given in a very sincere and dramatic way, and it was received with the type of grace that I find to be uncommon. [State Senator](#)

[Sarah Anthony](#) attended the apology and gave one of the official responses. She is the first Black woman to serve as a state representative in Lansing's history. Senator Anthony said that she initially got involved in politics because she did not believe White peoples' hearts could be changed and that the only way change could happen was through legislation. That's why she became a senator. She said that witnessing the apology completely changed her mind about what it is that God can do. Evangelist Annie C. Foreman of Reachout Christian Center Church gave another response and began by thanking the participants for having the decency to apologize. She told her personal story about being a four-year old girl who was forced to pick cotton instead of going to school when she was a child living in Mississippi. *(continues on p. 18)*

[Part I — The Question:](#) Is an apology for slavery and Jim Crow necessary for racial justice and healing, or just a waste of time?



Hon. Jennifer Roberts: Let me start out as someone who gave an apology [during a public hearing organized by the Reimagining America Project (RAP) on environmental justice]. And

after we did that, [Dr.] Rodney [Slater] said to me, "I think you felt like you needed to say that, Jennifer." And he was right. I've been an environmental advocate my whole life. You look at a city like Charlotte and the health of individuals in the Black and Brown neighborhoods is much worse. There are many more chronic illnesses, and that's from a conscious zoning policy that put those neighborhoods in harm's way -- near highways, near factories, taking away tree cover. These decisions took place over decades and I wasn't part of them. But I was part of not recognizing when I went out hiking that there were just white people out there. I had not realized when I went to advocate

with the Sierra Club that it was a bunch of white people who didn't reflect our community. I didn't ask: *Why are we not hearing from people of color?* When I became a county commissioner, I started to see on a map where we lack parks, clean air, access to clean water for kids to play in. I started seeing the connection between that and unhealthy communities. And so I brought all that into my short atonement during the RAP hearing, asking why did I not see this when I was younger? But now that I see this, it's incumbent upon me to do something about it. It helps me to pay it forward, to feel that, even though I bring with me a history of slave owners, keeping clean areas for white people, and not recognizing that we were excluding folks, I bring that history forward to help other people who look like me understand, to not feel guilty. We don't want to cause people to feel guilty because then they tend to close-up and get defensive. Instead,

(continues on p. 15)

ICQ*: You held a symposium on April 12th on the history of slavery and the Dutch church at your church in the city of Zwolle. How did that go?



Rev. Jeroen Sytsma: It was a wonderful evening. We had about 300 people in attendance from across the Netherlands and more than a thousand people watched the livestream from Indonesia,

Suriname, Curacao and the Dutch Antilles. July 1st will mark 150 years since slavery was abolished in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, so this is a year of remembrance.

ICQ: What did you do in the symposium? What did it mean for people?

Jeroen: I spoke first and I realized I had to do a kind of confession – to be honest about the role the church played in the slave trade. I felt the best thing I could do was clear the way for the rest of the program; and when you clear the way, you should name the dirt. I felt I needed to do more than just words, so I included silence to express remembrance and sorrow. I ended by making the connection between the patterns that kept ancient slavery alive so long to the patterns that allow modern slavery to exist today.

After me, Barbara Esseboom from [Keti Koti Arnhem](#) spoke (photo above). *Keti koti* is Surinamese for “chains broken” and the expression for when they celebrate the end of slavery each July 1st. Barbara is originally from Suriname and is the great, great grandchild of people who were enslaved.

ICQ: What did she say?

Jeroen: She talked about how a big thing like slavery became a part of her family history. But to be

honest, I can't remember most of her words because she sang a song, a child's song, and that's what I remember. Long ago people started to sing this song which originated in the time of slavery, but is still known. It's about a child. Barbara sang, “I'm sorry, it's my fault, I picked two less coffee beans.” So it was a nice song, kind of a lullaby. But when you listen to the words, you realized that it was a child making a confession to her master, her

owner. A very horrible part of our history is saved in the words of a children's song. It made a big impression on all of us. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry.”

ICQ: That must have been very powerful.

Jeroen: Yes, it was. The third, keynote speaker, Alex van Stipriaan is a former professor at Erasmus University (Rotterdam) in Caribbean history who knows a lot about the transatlantic slave trade. He started saying to us — we have an expression in Dutch, maybe you do in English as well— “the black pages in a history book.”

ICQ: We would say ‘a dark chapter’ in our history, and those words are problematic too.

Jeroen: Yeah, for sure. Professor van Stipriaan told us “You cannot read a history book, a lot of white pages of beautiful history, and pull out 2 or 3 ‘black pages’ so there's just nice history left.” This was our history for ages -- the whole of our culture, our economics, our thinking about people which was connected to the slave trade. So he asked us to never again say, “this was a black page from our history” because this makes it much too small.



Photos by Bsharp-Media.nl

ICQ: I apologize for my next question because I'm putting all of the Netherlands on your shoulders. But what's your perception about where the Dutch people are, generally speaking, in terms of engaging the Netherlands' history with slavery?

Jeroen: Well, this is really the whole of the country on my shoulders, but it's a small country. *(chuckle)* I'd guess the situation is that most of the people, the big middle group, are not interested at all; they just live their lives. Then on one side there's a group that's against, that says: "Well, this is history now. Everybody can live his life in Holland. So let's move on." On the other side are people who know how this history still has influence today. The Dutch word is *doorwerken*. This group sees the importance of remembrance. This is also quite new. Ten years ago, I never thought about the history of Holland, the slave trade and the role of the church. So this is growing in our society, in a good way.

ICQ: Do you think an apology for slavery is needed?

Jeroen: I think it's needed for two reasons. First, when those who are most closely connected to the

people who were done harm say "For us an apology would help a lot," then you have to have very good reasons not to do it. They should be in charge of what is needed. Like Jesus said, if somebody asks me to go one mile, let's make it two. Second, I think evil is something spiritual. It's like a cancer, not just this 'black page' in history. I like how the Bible says that to move on, you have to put things in the light and the truth will set you free. So when you know the government was responsible for horrible deeds, put it in the light. When you know that the church did horrible things, put it in the light.

ICQ: The Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, apologized for the Dutch role in slavery in December. What did you think of [his apology](#)?

Jeroen: I was very happy with it. The Prime Minister was honest about how he himself changed from saying that no apologies were necessary to now believing an apology is necessary. He ended by saying "I'm not putting a period on this but a semi-colon. I am not saying 'We are done now, I apologized.' Rather, we have just started." ☘



National Slavery Memorial, Amsterdam
Photo by Pat Jackson

The **Interwoven Congregations'** Series:

Doing **Racial Justice**

Part I (May 2023):

The APOLOGY

Nine interviews. Nine views on whether an apology is needed for racial justice and healing or just a waste of time. And if apologies do matter, what makes for a good apology and what pitfalls should we avoid?

Part II (Aug. 2023):

Congregations *Doing Justice*

We highlight the work of two congregations in Northern Virginia (Calloway UMC & Rock Spring UCC) and the Reimagining America Project in Charlotte, NC to see the steps people of faith are taking to impact systemic racism today.

Part III (Nov. 2023):

REPARATIONS

Several interviewees from Part I (plus new voices!) help us examine whether or not reparations for African Americans can be a path to racial justice and healing. What's the case for and against reparations? And how are they happening TODAY, in the civic sphere and thru faith communities?

Part IV (Feb. 2024):

What does racial justice look like for **NATIVE** **AMERICANS?**

Mark Charles and other Native American leaders speak about the state of Native communities today and what racial justice and healing might look like for indigenous people.



Public reading of PCUSA apology in Lansing, MI. Image from Justice League video.

(Willye Bryan, continued from p. 3)

But African Americans are not vengeful; as a people, we're just not vengeful. The resilience of African Americans in this country is remarkable, so taking an apology and moving to improving and healing for the entire country is very possible.

An apology frees and liberates both groups. It frees White people from any guilt. And when you get rid of the guilt, then you're ready to work and improve this society. For African Americans, it's the acknowledgement that the wrong that was done was real, and that we can all benefit from moving ahead.

ICQ: Is an apology enough?

Willye: No, and that's the deal. The apology IS empty if you don't have a plan to do some healing. In our model with the [Justice League of Greater Lansing Michigan](#), we offer three pillars: educational scholarships, homeownership and helping people become entrepreneurs. Those are concrete, tangible ways to promote racial healing.

ICQ: Do you think we can we get to healing by doing justice and just skip the apology?

Willye: I think the apology is integral to the process. You may go into a neighborhood and say, "Okay, let's improve this neighborhood." But do you acknowledge how the neighborhood got like this? Are you saying that it's my fault that my neighborhood is in disrepair? Because that's the innuendo. If there's no mention of the super high-

ways that went through and destroyed Black neighborhoods, no mention of how Black Wall Street was just burned to the ground and folk driven out of town, then am I being blamed for my plight? Or will we acknowledge why this neighborhood is like this and apologize for how it got like that?

ICQ: The Presbyterian Church (USA) issued a [formal apology to African Americans for slavery](#) and the church's complicity in that in the summer of 2022. You then organized a local event in Lansing to publicly share that apology. What led you to do that and what do you think that event meant?

Willye: After the PC(USA) issued its apology in Louisville, KY the idea was that individuals, churches and presbyteries would take the apology back to their communities and follow through. And so, at a

“African Americans are not vengeful... so taking an apology and moving to improving and healing for the entire country is very possible.”

— Willye Bryan

meeting of our Presbytery (Presbytery of Lake Michigan), the apology was read. But there were only four Black people in the room, including me.

(Willye Bryan, continued from p. 9)

So, what are you going to do? Are you going to issue an apology and then put it under a barrel? Or, are you going to turn it into an opportunity to engage, to issue that apology to African Americans who have never officially received an apology at all? Because what happens when Black people hear those words? Black people hear “I am sorry. I knew you were being abused. I knew you were being harmed and I did nothing. I watched you be raped and killed and beaten; and I did nothing.” For Black people to hear those words is very powerful. And then the extension we want to make is “now I want to do something about that.”

ICQ: Can you describe how you took the apology out into the community and the reaction to that?

Willye: We invited Black ministers and held the event at [Reachout Center Christian Church](#) which is predominantly Black. Representatives from 15 predominantly White churches came, went to the front of the room, and [read the apology](#). Then we invited people in the audience to speak if they wanted to. That was really quite overwhelming. There were a lot of tears. They could say, “Yes, that did happen, and I am gratified that you have come to apologize. I appreciate it; I’ve never had this. We know it wasn’t you; it was your forefathers, your ancestors. But you’re taking responsibility and you’re saying you’re sorry.” People went into their backgrounds saying, “My parents were sharecroppers, and this is what happened to them.” We had young people say, “I never heard anything like that before.”

Then we said “This is not an empty apology. We’re not just saying we’re sorry and then walk out the door. The Justice League is here to follow up on this apology.” People said, “You mean you want to also *do something* about it?” I believe that will give us a way to partner with each other to get out of this fog that we’re in with the racial divide. ☘

(Rev. Peter Jarrett-Schell, continued from p. 3)

Otherwise, we’re just throwing things at a wall and seeing if something sticks. And spiritually, most Christian traditions hold up confession as a necessary part of our redemptive process.

ICQ: Is there such a thing as a “good apology” and a “bad apology?”

Peter: If they aren’t done well, an apology can be salt in the wound that can actually do more harm. Here are some pieces [of a good apology] that we can lift up. An apology should be focused on the hurts and the needs of the victim rather than the offender, and that’s usually where apologies go off the rails. They often become more about the need of the offender to absolve themselves or be forgiven — or to end the conversation. So the apology should be distinguished, I think, from the act of asking forgiveness.

“An apology should be focused on the hurts and the needs of the victim rather than the offender, and that’s usually where apologies go off the rails.”

— Rev. Peter Jarrett-Schell

Second, there’s an element of determination towards repentance that I think is a point of a good apology. When we acknowledge specific harms, the ways that our institutions, churches or denominations have inflicted harm, we need to have a strong-willed determination to say “We recognize this and we will do our level best to make sure that these things don’t continue. If I have this choice again, I am determined to make a different choice.”

Specificity, I think, is an essential piece of an apology. Oftentimes, we act on a vague sense that we know that something is not right. I think most people have had the interpersonal experience of

(Rev. Peter Jarrett-Schell, continued from p. 10)

saying, "I'm so sorry that I did X," and having the person say back to us, "There was a problem, but the thing that you are apologizing for is not the way you hurt me. It was something different." Getting that right is really important.

Then the last piece that I think really distinguishes a good apology from a bad one is the follow through. What are you going to do to ensure that these harms stop? What structures and policies will you create? How are you going to hold yourself accountable? Did I do the things I said I was going to do?"

"Statements of apology get it wrong because either [people] haven't spent enough time listening and investigating, or because there's an element of deflection."

— Rev. Peter Jarrett-Schell

ICQ: Do you think that people are in a place to know what they're actually apologizing for?

Peter: I think frequently not, and so these statements of apology get it wrong because either [people] haven't spent enough time listening and investigating, or because there's an element of deflection. To be honest, we've got this wrong in the Diocese of Washington -- we got stuck at the place of chattel slavery. A lot of the institutional apologies are about our participation in chattel slavery. On some level that's very understandable because it is foundational. But when we make that the crux of what we're apologizing about, we ignore all the ways our institutions continued to participate in anti-Black racism after the abolition of slavery and continue to do so in the present moment.

ICQ: So whether you're Episcopalian or Presbyterian or Baptist or a Quaker, if your hierarchy has done an apology, is there a need for individual members of congregations to affirm that apology personally, as opposed to just saying, "Yeah, my denomination did that"?

Peter: It absolutely has to become personal at the congregational level. An apology by a denominational body, a synod, is necessarily going to be high level. And that's important. But a lot of the ways we actually participate in these harms through our churches are very local -- the development project your church undertook, the admissions policy at your parochial school, things like that.

ICQ: Your white flight history.

Peter: Yes, all these pieces -- the history of white flight, hiring practices, the curriculum we use, the way we elevate whiteness in our iconography and our theology. It's absolutely essential [to focus locally, individually] because in the last 20 years or so, very appropriately, there's been a shift away from looking at individual attitudes and biases and instead towards structurally created and sustained racism. That's really important because it is those structures that really do harm to folks. But I also think that there's a danger in the way we talk about it, which gives it a certain level of remove. We talk about institutional racism like this giant that comes down from the hill to terrorize us. But those institutions exist because we participate in them. So there's an element of seeing ourselves in the picture while still keeping a focus on "Where do I have power to push the systems that I participate in?" So I think that the congregational level apology is important and the individual apology is important. But in all of those things it's the question of what comes next. How are you living into it? What changes are you making? ☸

The APOLOGY List

Below is a listing of select apologies from different faith traditions, academic institutions and governments. We conclude this partial list with a few articles that examine the role of apologies for slavery and Jim Crow.

A. FAITH TRADITIONS

[The Church of England](#) (2006)

[The Episcopal Church](#) (2008)

[The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) (2019)

[The Presbyterian Church \(USA\)](#) (2022)

[Quakers — New York Yearly Meeting](#) (2013)

[The Roman Catholic Church — Pope John Paul II](#) (1985)

[The Southern Baptist Convention](#) (1995)

[The United Church of Christ](#) (1999)

[The United Methodist Church](#) (2000)

B. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

[Univ. of Alabama](#) (2018), [Brown Univ.](#) (2006), [Davidson College](#) (2020), [Georgetown Univ.](#) (2017), [Princeton Univ.](#) (2017), [Wake Forest Univ.](#) (2020), [College of William & Mary](#) (2018)

C. GOVERNMENTS

Europe: [European Parliament](#) (2001), [Denmark](#) (2017), [France](#) (2001), [The Netherlands](#) (2022)

The United States: [The U.S. House of Representatives](#) (2008) and [The U.S. Senate](#) (2009)

(Note: The U.S. Congress has never passed, and a U.S. President has never signed, a joint bill apologizing for slavery.)

D. ARTICLES / PAPERS

[Five Times the United States Officially Apologized](#) — Smithsonian Magazine (2016)

[How to Apologize for Slavery](#) — The Atlantic (2014)

[The Power of Apology and the Process of Historical Reconciliation](#) — Univ. of South Carolina (2001)

[Why is it so Hard to Say ‘I’m Sorry’ for Slavery?](#) — Governing.com (2022)

(Mark Charles, continued from p. 3)

ICQ: Could you recap for our readers the meaning and significance of the Doctrine of Discovery?

Mark: The Doctrine of Discovery is a series of Papal Bulls, edicts of the Catholic Church, written between 1492 and 1493. It's the church in Europe saying to the nations of Europe, "Wherever you go, whatever

land you find not ruled by white, European Christian rulers, those people are sub-human and their land is yours to take." So that's the doctrine that justifies Portugal going into Africa, kidnapping the people and enslaving them because they didn't see them as human. It's the same doctrine that allowed

Columbus, who was literally lost at sea, to land at what they were calling the New World and claim to have discovered it, even though there were millions of people

already occupying those lands. This doctrine, which Stephen Newcomb calls the *Doctrine of Invasion*, creates this very dysfunctional theological imagination that elevates whiteness and subjugates people of color. And that imagination is what gets imbedded into the psyche of America. It's written into our foundations, our Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, our criminal justice system with Supreme Court case precedents; and it creates the imagination for what we call Manifest Destiny.

The Vatican [in its March 30th statement] actually claimed they never wrote a theological Doctrine of Discovery. They say *The writings of our popes were co-opted by governmental and colonial entities who then wrote this political and military doctrine of*

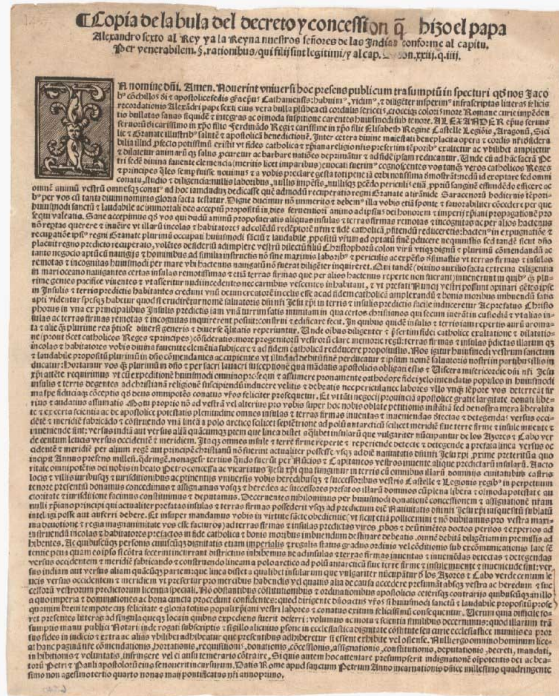
discovery. And we repudiate that. But the Doctrine of Discovery was never part of our teaching. This wasn't something we did. Yes, we regret the fact that we didn't speak up more loudly and oppose governmental agencies as they did these things.

But that's just a complete rewriting of history and doesn't acknowledge that the Popes, yes, they may not have been preaching these things in their pulpits, but they were absolutely tutoring the kings of Portugal and Spain: "Here's what you have permission to do." [The Vatican's apology is a nine point repudiation.

Six of those points are about how great the Catholic Church is, how much it loves indigenous peoples and how much is done to help us around the country and around the world.

ICQ: Can you speak about the 2009 apology offered to Native Americans?

Mark: Our nation is nowhere near ready to apologize and [its citizens] don't have a clue about what it's done. I'm trying to teach this history so that eventually the nation can take ownership of what it's done. About the same time that Senator Sam Brownback was working on the apology to native peoples through Congress, I started using this metaphor of the grandmother in the house. Being Native American, living on these lands, is like being this old grandmother who has a very large, beautiful house. Years ago some people came into our house, they locked us upstairs in the bedroom, violently, and today our house is full of people. They're sitting on our furniture, they're eating our food, they're having a party inside our house. And the most painful part of all this is that nobody from the party ever comes upstairs,



Pope Alexander VI's Demarcation Bull, May 1493
The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

seeks out the grandmother in the bedroom, sits down next to her on the bed, takes her hand and simply says, "Thank you."

That sounds simplistic, but saying thank you requires a massive paradigm shift. That's because right now

white Americans believe Turtle Island [a name some native peoples use for North America] is their promised land, they are the hosts of these lands -- which is not true, theologically, militarily, even politically. Saying "thank

you" requires making a base level shift. If I'm thanking somebody else for allowing me to remain here, I'm acknowledging this is not my land. And so saying "thank you" is the first step into this new paradigm, and that's what will allow the conversation to start.

When [we read the \[2009\] apology](#) [to Native Americans] in front of the U.S. Capitol building, I had hand delivered letters to senators; I had sent a letter to the Obama administration; I had reached out to political colleagues, religious colleagues, business

"I said to my people, 'Yeah, we can't accept this apology.'" — Mark Charles

people, educational leaders, the press. I spent a year publicizing this thing, inviting anyone who would listen to come and join us on that day. I wanted someone to take ownership of that apology and own it publicly. So we read the apology. We read it in English, Navajo and Ojibway because if you're going to apologize, you should do it in the language of the people to whom you are apologizing. At the

end, I looked, I was waiting, hoping *someone* would come. But no one came. So finally I took the stage and I said to our people: "Yeah, we can't accept this apology. It's not out of anger or bitterness, it's out of respect, respect for our nation who absolutely

can do better, and respect for ourselves who deserve better."

If you read the 2009 apology, it's seven bullet points that mention no specific tribe, no specific treaty, no specific injustice. "You have some nice land. Our citizens didn't take it

politely. Let's now just call it all of our land and sort it together." Everything you learn as a child or in Sunday school about an apology is absent from that. And then it ends with a disclaimer saying, "and just in case there was something you might possibly be able to hold us to later, this is not legally binding."

ICQ: So never mind.

Mark: And what's the point of that? So yeah, the country is nowhere near ready to give a meaningful apology. I could get every U.S. citizen to understand the issues, and the country could still decide, "Yeah, we don't want to apologize." And that's their choice, right? I can't compel them to live justly. I can't compel my nation to do what's right.

ICQ: What's your call for faith communities?

Mark: My call for the church is to enter into a space of lament, which is not confession or repentance. Lament is sitting in the brokenness and letting the depth of the brokenness almost overwhelm you, so that when it comes to making reparations or giving an apology, you actually are connected to what you're talking about instead of being in denial or covering it up. The book by my



Mark Charles reading the apology to Native Americans at the U.S. Capitol.

Photo: PBS Reconnecting Roots

(Jennifer Roberts, continued from p. 5)

we want to liberate ourselves from that history by paying it forward. So I think that for me the apology was healing. And the apology is really important for people who've been impacted because they're like, "Oh my gosh, I've finally been heard." We may not see changes instantly, but as an elected official, I found people get the most frustrated when they feel like nobody is listening because they are not valued. So when you speak [an apology], you help people absolutely feel like they've been heard.

ICQ: Rodney, what would you say? Apologies, are they necessary or a waste of time?



Rev. Dr. Rodney Sadler: There's a part of me that wants to say yes and no. Number one, an apology that is uttered without action behind it means nothing. I don't want to offend anyone,

but the Southern Baptists years ago apologized for slavery. I have yet to see what they've done substantively to make up for what they did wrong, to transform the system about race that was built into a system that divided churches premised on race.

"The term 'apology' is problematic for me. The Greek term for it means 'to defend oneself,' and that's the last thing we need"

— Rev. Dr. Rodney Sadler

So I think an empty apology is perhaps even more harmful than no apology at all. Then the term 'apology' is problematic for me. The Greek term for it means "to defend oneself," and that's the last thing that we need in the midst of encounters to talk about race, racial disparity and perpetuation of a supremacy system.

ICQ: An "apologist."

Rodney. Exactly. We don't need what is in the Greek *apologomai* -- this notion of self-defense. Perhaps what we need is *homologia* -- confession. Confession -- being honest about what was done wrong, about the way that my family and I myself have participated and continue to perpetuate the system -- that's what we need to start with. We need confession that's followed up by repentance, transformation, metanoia, doing something different than what was done before. So if by apology you mean a confession that leads to personal and systemic change, I'm all for it. But if by apology we just mean words stated, printed by the media, "We've dealt with the race issue, let's move on now" -- that's not going to work. We are also worried about the concept of "reconciliation." How do you reconcile something that has never been conciled? So let me say it more simply: no justice, no peace. If we want to seek shalom -- wholeness, completeness -- we need to start with *tzedek* -- justice that undergirds. ☸

(Mark Charles, continues from p. 14)

co-author ([Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times](#) by Soong-Chan Rah) demonstrates how anemic the American church is at lament. When you believe the myth of your own exceptionalism, there's no theological space to lament. Today, both the liberal and conservative wings of the church are deeply influenced by systemic white Christian nationalism. This isn't just a white evangelical thing, this is the American church. It has no integrity and it's not capable of leading this dialogue because it's still in bed with empire. So for the church, leading is not even a question. To participate in a meaningful way, the church has to deconstruct so much of what it is that I still find it doubtful. If the goal was simply fundraising or signing a petition, we could get that done quickly. Systemic change is not going to come without incredibly hard work. ☸

(Woullard Lett, continued from p. 4)

address some of these issues. They also recently had the Commission on Institutional Change that produced and released a volume called "[Widening the Circle of Concern](#)" that talked about activities that could help marginalized communities.

ICQ: Do you think we can just do racial justice and skip over the apology?

Woullard: The first problem that we have is the acknowledgement part, because there's no such thing as race. As long as we subscribe to the construct of race, we subscribe to all of the conditions that it was created to produce -- the privilege and the punishment, the othering, the disconnection. We talk about

whites and BIPOC -- us and them. What are we doing? James Baldwin, around 1968, said (paraphrasing): "If you think you're white, then you're irrelevant to this whole conversation because you already bought into the thing where because of the way that the society is constructed, it's 'We, whites are up here and everybody else is down there' -- so anything you do is charity." And I think it was St. John Chrysotom who said: "What's owed in justice should never be given in charity."

ICQ: What I wrestle with is that while we understand that race is a social construct -- and so a biological fiction -- we also know that *the impact* of race is real. A Black man still can't get a cab.

Woullard: It's not the impact of race, because race doesn't exist, *but the subscription to the dictates of this idea*. I picked up this book called [Racecraft](#)

because I'm here in New England and one of the churches that I served was in Salem, Massachusetts. When people talked about women and witches, there were consequences. Women died. But they didn't solve the problem by saying: "Well, let's just be nice to the witches." They dealt with the reality that *that wasn't a reality*. As long as you and I play along with this game, then, like our brother James Baldwin said, we're irrelevant to really addressing this problem. We're promulgating it. We're complicit.

ICQ: Some people say "I don't see color. I'm human, you're human, so that should just be it and we should be good." How do you guard against

"color blindness" which seems to me to ignore the reality that as a Black man, you have a different life experience than I do, as a White man, walking down the street?

Woullard: But you referred to me as a "Black man." I'm not a Black man, I'm melanin enhanced. You're not a White man, you're melanin deficient. So let's call it what it is. We can say a woman is fussy, but calling her a witch has a whole other connotation to it. Even if you say, "Well, we're not going to drown her, but she's a witch" -- that means something. And we've got to deal with this naming that's ingrained [in our discussion of 'race']. I'm not saying it's easy. There are many steps we have to take before we reach the tipping point. It does not mean that we say, "No, don't go there because it's going to take a long time." What sense does that make? We'd still be talking about witches in Salem, Massachusetts. We've got to do something different. ❄



(Rabbi Jonah Pesner, continued from p. 4)

There's no antisemitism in wokeness and people don't know the origin of that term. To be woke was a deeply rooted phenomenon of terror in the black community in the south. When northern blacks would visit their family in the south, the southern Blacks would say to the visiting northerners, "You got to be woke down here because you don't know when an encounter with a white person may lead to a lynching. You may get killed if you're not woke." So to then co-opt that phrase and turn it into this kind of demeaning racist trope, I find disgraceful.

ICQ: I know the URJ passed [a resolution affirming Black Lives Matter](#) and the URJ's commitment to racial justice. Has the URJ taken the step of doing a formal apology related to slavery and Jim Crow?

Jonah: It's interesting that you ask that because I was invited years ago by the [Evangelical Lutheran Church of America](#) to represent the Jewish community at an event to receive their apology for Luther's antisemitism. I should add that my first experience of Lutheranism was when an idealistic Lutheran pastor, Rev. John Heinemeier, who was pastoring an all-black church in Roxbury, MA, brought me into inter-faith community organizing for social justice. I had no idea as a young rabbi about the historic role of Lutheranism in antisemitism and the Holocaust. So I said to them, "I'm happy to receive your apology." I understand why apologies are important. But I just want to acknowledge that sometimes actual relationships and doing work together can be more reparative and healing than public acts of apology. But I received that apology that day.

Doing an apology for slavery is not something that,

to my knowledge, the people in the Reform Jewish movement have talked about. We've really focused on the work of both reparations from an advocacy perspective in Washington and on a local level, such as synagogues confronting their history of benefiting from assimilation and whiteness. We have some buildings that were built by enslaved

laborers -- and so what is the responsibility to the community? How do we join together in an intersectional or multiracial way to pursue real reparations and repair? I think we'd be open to giving an apology; but we would want our actions to match our words. An apology without action hasn't come up to be honest.

ICQ: Do you think we can we get to racial justice and healing without an apology?



Jonah: I'm a big believer in apologies. I'm known in the world as somebody who apologizes a lot because from my perspective it's easy to do and it enables progress, whether it's my direct fault, something I'm complicit with, or it just happened. I'm saying to the human on the other side of my Buberian moment: "I am so deeply sorry, either for what I did or for what happened." I try to live in authenticity, so it's not like I'm pretending to be sorry so that we can get somewhere. It's more like "Let's dwell in the space of the pain that this has caused and the role I may have played and apologize for it and own it. Then we can move forward." So I'm a big believer in apology. There is a brilliant book by Dr. Aaron Lazare which we encouraged all of our congregations around 15 years ago to read called [On Apology](#). It talks about why do an apology, and how an apology is effective and genuine. So if you're going to drill down in this area I would find that book.

(Rabbi Jonah Pesner, continued from p. 17)

In the URJ's resolution affirming that Black Lives Matter we acknowledged that there were some Jews in America who were either slaveowners or slave traders. It was not particularly common and there's been a sensitivity in the Jewish community about antisemitism and the ways in which some of these topics get weaponized and myths and tropes get created about us. That being said, those of us who present as white undoubtedly benefit from white privilege and that includes some of the repercussions of slavery. So I think we would want an apology that is truthful and rooted in history rather than one that plays into the stereotype that the Jews were the money and the traders behind enslavement. That would build deeper understanding.

By the way, 10 -15% of the American Jewish community is black, brown or in other ways not white, and

one in seven Jewish families includes a Person of Color. We are and have always been a multiracial community and that is only increasing over time. So one of the things to do would be to center Black Jews who are the descendants of enslaved African Americans in the conversation about what an apology ought to look like. And then the second thing is that when George Floyd was murdered the Reform movement, and many other Jewish groups, came out with a very clear statement that Black Lives Matter is a Jewish value. That to be Jewish is to say Black Lives Matter. And so I think that was partly an apology for the slow way in which, five years before, when Mike Brown, Freddy Gray, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland and others were killed, the Jewish community was slow to say out loud with a full throat that Black Lives Matter. But maybe we should be more transparent and clear about saying "We are sorry and therefore..." That's something I want to think about. ☸

(Rev. Jermaine Ross-Allam, continued from p. 5)

My feelings about the apology are complicated -- they sit both uncomfortably and hopefully within me simultaneously. I'll say three things about apologies. First, apologies are insulting to God and to humanity and are incoherent and absurd in the extreme absent effective reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence. Second, apologies have the potential to indicate a shift in traditional U.S. Protestant culture away from the current epoch, in which the power of federal law appears to be the only hope for persuading people to institute human relations among human beings. And finally, apologies offer the descendants of European settlers the opportunity, as Evangelist Forman suggests, to begin a process of becoming decent by acknowledging the glaring



horror of what others are and have been forced to endure as a consequence of centuries of racist terror, sexual violence, labor theft and other techniques of colonial and theological self-deception.

I think we only will know what the apology is worth by looking at the fruit. If we see fruit worthy of repentance, then I think historically we will look back and say those apologies were the first step. If these apologies instead are a part of the cycle of outrage and nothing new happens, then we will have to look back and say those apologies were just another instance of Protestant self-

deception. We should rightly applaud what the apology might lead to. But we should also acknowledge that W.E.B. DuBois was correct to remind Presbyterians of our habit of saying very idealistic things and presenting a lofty picture of

who we think we are only to follow up with cynical activities that betray idealistic promise.

It is necessary to avoid cynicism and inspiring doom and gloom about things. When it comes to apologies, I never want to talk about it in such a way that makes people feel that it is useless to apologize. But at the same time, I think it's very important not to treat the apology as if it has the moral value of repair. If the apology is Step One in a process that leads to repair and non-recurrence, then I think we can go back and really praise God for what the apology made possible. But I think it's important for Christian people to understand that the Spirit of God in us demands that we refuse to accept apologies that are only about words and that don't come with an earnest decision to pursue reparations as soon as possible and for as long as it takes.

ICQ: Do you think we can go forward with effective action on racial justice without apologizing?

Jermaine: I think you can have a transaction without an apology, but I don't think you would have anything worthy of the word justice. I say that because justice in its thickest theological sense is not simply a punishment for wrongdoing, but it is doing what is right in such a way that transforms both the person who is righting the wrong and the person who has been wronged. And I think the United States of America is a place where the explicit and implicit assumption has been that Project America is such a wonderful occurrence on this planet that any damage incurred in the process is a worthy sacrifice.

ICQ: A God-ordained sacrifice, probably.

Jermaine: Yes, and this, of course, is blasphemy. U.S. Protestantism has no idea what to do when the human sacrifice rises up and says "No, you are not special, whether you hear the voice of God or not. What you're doing is wrong and must stop and you must repair the damage." This requires a revolution in both spiritual and political thought and

activity in this country, and I'm all for it. It's long-overdue, but the Protestant and capitalist captivity of the church has captivated our theological and political imagination to such an extent that we actually don't believe that what is right, necessarily and possible, is in fact possible. And so, as Christians, we have to deal with our own atheism. Practicing Christianity doesn't prevent us from rejecting or ignoring the full implications of the incarnation of God in a human being. And so we have to apologize in earnest, and then we have to hear what is required in order for human relations to finally begin in this land we now call the United States. If we don't do that, then we'll be turning our back on possibilities that God has caused to exist since before the world was created.

"U.S. Protestantism has no idea what to do when human sacrifice rises up and says ... 'What you're doing is wrong ... and you must repair the damage.'"

— Rev. Jermaine Ross-Allam

ICQ: What do you make of the fact that the Presbyterian Church (USA) didn't get to an apology until 2022? Aren't we a bit late when other denominations were apologizing 10, 15 and 20 years ago?

Jermaine: An apology without repair and reparations is useless. So, I think it's actually appropriate that the Presbyterian Church issued its official apology in the same year it decided to establish [The Center for the Repair of Historic Harms](#). Other denominations that have apologized without any plan to begin working toward reparations simply present me with a question mark. But I do have faith that we're in a moment in which people are making the decision to allow themselves to be transformed by what God is showing them to be right, necessary and possible. ☸

3 Steps You Can Take in *Doing* Racial Justice

1. Support Interwoven Congregations!

Producing the Quarterly and working to help faith communities be agents for racial justice and healing aren't possible without the support of donors across the nation. There are key resource tools for congregations under development (see #2!) that we can only undertake with your support. So please [donate today](#) and help build this network for racial justice and healing!

2. Take the Congregational Antiracism Quotient Survey!

The Antiracism Quotient Survey is one of the new tools in our Congregational Toolkit. The "AQ" Survey helps faith communities identify where they are on their racial justice journey and what their next steps might be. [Click here to request your \(free\) custom link](#) to the survey for your faith community.

3. Sign the PLEDGE!

We invite your faith community to sign the [Interwoven Congregations Pledge](#) for racial justice and healing. Join congregations that are committing themselves to deepen their understanding of racism, build relationships across the divide of race, and then *(to the point of this series!)* take concrete steps to help disrupt and dismantle systemic racism. If your faith community is already deeply steeped in this work, sign the pledge to re-affirm that commitment and help encourage other congregations that are just getting underway!

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— *Pat Jackson*, Executive Director, [Interwoven Congre-](#)