

Breaking the Miller Cycle:
The Center for the Repair of Historical Harms
and
the Ministry of Planetary Peace

The Miller Cycle

In an editorial written to Outlook Magazine in 1912, Kelly Miller—the first Afro-American to receive a graduate degree in mathematics—described a characteristic feature of U.S. American culture: the outrage cycle. Referencing thousands of Afro-American citizens already immolated alive in public amid “unabashed perpetrators laugh[ing] with glee at the nullity of law,” Miller observes the following response pattern:

The American people look impotently on with a momentary shudder, only to lapse into their accustomed mood, in sure expectancy of another shock. At each horrid happening, the press indulges in a heated spasm of righteous indignation, but soon grows cold again. The outlaws are rarely brought to trial, never to justice. The National consciousness is becoming sere. Is this the final expression of our boasted American Christian civilization? Are the energies of the American people so focalized upon material values that the moral sense has become atrophied?¹

With these words, Miller offers an image of the national body politic that serves as a passage way. The image is of a nation of peoples with moral intelligence sufficient to chide from a distance savage behavior that belies all pretension to status as a progressive, civilized, and enlightened people, but without the requisite courage to rescind impunity for terrorism against its most loyal citizens. Moreover, the Miller Cycle highlights one role of U.S. American commercial media. His statement exposes one way in which media outlets assist one part of the body politic in pointing the finger at another part, creating the impression that the historical

¹ Miller, Kelly. Lynching and Lawlessness. Outlook (1893-1924); Feb 24, 1912; ProQuest, pg. 473.

choice to grant one part of the nation with impunity in advance for devouring another part in the manner of non-human beings is an historical quirk and not a national characteristic that has threatened the viability of the United States since the signing of the U.S. Constitution.

Today—thanks to corporate media’s ever-tightening grip on the public imagination—citizens continue to be seduced into that cyclical “heated spasm of righteous indignation” that “grows cold again” by design. The real danger of the nation’s moral imagination “becoming sere” is managed (though not mitigated) so that our capacity for moral outrage is preserved, in part, through a carousel of outrages. Further complicating matters, media corporations use law to co-create new social capabilities through collecting and weaponizing data on public outrage to better discern which atrocities U.S. American taxpayers will either tolerate or ignore—but inevitably fund with little, if any, scrutiny.

The Miller Cycle disfigures the image of God in humanity. This cycle tempts us to grow accustomed to offering other people’s bodies as living sacrifices by misrepresenting the heavy burdens faced by the survivors of chattel slavery, genocides, continental land theft, reparations denial, and apartheid as *unfortunate tragedies* that cannot be lifted. The Miller Cycle disfigures the image of God in ourselves when we become persuaded to withhold transformative solidarity from the human targets of European colonization while believing corporate media and other cultural forces when certain non-White peoples are presented as perennial victims whose oppression has no material remedy. The Miller Cycle identifies how we make our bodies into the passageways through which defilement and unnecessary death attack creation through our refusal to worship our Creator in a rational manner and be transformed by God renewing our

minds. The Miller Cycle of outrage is the Golden Calf of Protestant U.S. modernity: one of the dark cycles binding national life to the superstition that we cannot do better.

Breaking the Miller Cycle: Introducing the Center for the Repair of Historical Harms

At the Center for the Repair of Historical Harms, fidelity to the Gospel involves breaking the Miller Cycle of outrage over the racist legacies of Europe's colonization of the land currently called the United States. To be clear, the Center for Repair does not seek to dampen the tumultuous eruption of righteous anger without which many of us would never have woken up to one critical fact: liberation is a basic spiritual process in creation violated only at great peril to the human beings who cling to what must be broken down and reconceived. Among the things to be broken down, however, is the cynical (if unspoken) consensus that trafficking in buzzwords, lamenting on cue, posting the right hashtag, acknowledging (to *increase*) white privilege, green-washing environmental crimes, kneeling in other peoples' Kente cloth, endorsing non-White people's bad ideas, and lowering education standards for communities systemically and historically prevented from discovering their true aptitude and, thereby, meaningfully contribute to their community's healing.

Instead, as a ministry of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Center for Repair focuses on growing the number of human beings working to spread the Good News that reparatory justice and reparations make common sense for the common good as soon as possible and for as long as it takes to get the work done. But how exactly do we grow that number? I am so glad that you asked!

The privilege of working in fidelity to the Gospel sets our work in motion and inspires us to persevere in fidelity to that which the Gospel makes possible. Just as Jesus and his mother,

Mary, willingly submitted their lives to bear the will of the Creator into Creation—according to their natures and during the only opportunity they had to be human on Earth—we respond in kind during this time that we have to be human on this planet. Moreover, because Presbyterians in this land have contributed to the teaching that the very existence of the United States requires respecting the right to hold human beings and stolen land as private and state property, the Center for Repair affirms that sovereign relations and land repatriation processes with Indigenous nations, as well as reparations for Afro-Americans, are right, necessary and possible.

At the same time, we pray with our ancestors that the affairs of the earth will be conducted by us in the right relation to the way of heaven. For this reason, the Center for Repair rejects any notion that suggests that the administration of peace and plenty requires compromises that manifest as false choices between labor exploitation and progress; reparations denial and race relations management; national security and support for apartheid; or national cohesion and Indigenous genocides. Each of these false choices represent the transgenerational impacts of national and individual self-deception, intellectual laziness, and the willful denial of providence.

Good Fences Make Good Neighbors: Repair vs. Reparations, Cultural Specificity, and Functional Solidarities

Because reparations and reparatory justice are right, necessary, and possible, the Center for Repair actively discerns, negotiates, and organizes our unique and appropriate roles in movements for reparations as a ministry of the modern Protestant church in the United States at this time. In what remains, I will briefly describe the reasons why the Center for Repair

approaches the ministry of repair in the way that it does, some of the reparative work in which we are currently engaged, and our current understanding of one relation of reparations and reparatory justice to the larger Reformed tradition in our time and beyond.

First, the following is a critical operational distinction that grounds the work of the Center for Repair. Presbyterians (as well as other members of the post-Reformation family) have contributed to historical harms that now lie far beyond our denomination's capacity to remedy on our own. From legacies of pro-slavery propaganda in the form of plantation sermons to the attempt to relegate the choice to enslave human beings to the moral status of private scruples, to efforts to destroying a number of Indigenous languages in the name of national progress and Christian education; Presbyterians simply lack the material resources required to adequately respond to even a fraction of the calls for repair now coming from Indigenous nations, the Afro-American people, and others. For this reason and many others, the PC (U.S.A.) must do two things at the same time: repair historical harms committed against distinct historic communities within our own denomination and also forge partnerships with Indigenous nations, Afro-Americans, and other national and global communities to discover our role in the burgeoning national and global ecumenical movement to support a number of historic community's calls for the repairs that each of their futures require.

Therefore, the Presbyterian Church plots its exit from the Miller Cycle, in part, by first acknowledging that the national and global movement for reparations neither begins with us nor depends on us. Instead our gratitude to God inspires us to admit and to apologize for our denominations' role in the production of historical harms. That same gratitude moves us to acknowledge (and strive to discover) the critical contributions of individuals and organizations

focused on reparations such as Callie House, Queen Mother Audely Moore, William Darity, National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA), and National African American Reparations Commission (NCCRC). And perhaps most importantly, the movement of God's Spirit in our time inspires us to determine how to become trustworthy comrades to communities calling for the repair of historical harms inflicted in whole or in part by members of the Presbyterian family.

To be trustworthy colleagues in the ongoing global movement for reparations, it is necessary to name the relation of any denominations' ministry of repair to the finite goals that are named by distinct communities currently calling for repair. For example, former president Barack Obama once told rock musician, Bruce Springsteen, that while he believed that reparations for chattel slavery and Jim Crow legislation are certainly due to African Americans, he did not champion reparations legislation during his presidency because he believed White people and recent immigrants would reject the notion in a manner potentially counter-productive to the on-going pursuit of civil rights.

Unfortunately, Obama's utilitarian and circular logic serves to shield from scrutiny the errant belief that reparations, reparative justice, and functional access to civil rights are not intertwined. The former U.S. president's statement further reveals for mainline Christians a critical fact beyond the baleful state of the U.S. American moral imagination: we must fish for our own people. Just as Jesus instructed Peter and John, we must add our colleagues, our parishioners, our students, our constituents, our friends, our families, and ourselves to the number of people whose reparative activities will serve as communication to our elected officials that the era of reparations denial has come to an end. When the Christian descendants

of those peoples who helped commit European colonialism's originating harms finally show up for work in public—locally and nationally—acknowledging that reparations and reparatory justice are right, necessary, and possible, the church will then be able to mobilize community members who, for the moment, are not in frequent fellowship with communities who have been steadily at work repatriating their ancestral wealth before current events belatedly *woke up* middle Americans in the mainline tradition.

Another key aspect of functional solidarity in the ministry of repair is to cultivate the habit of respecting cultural specificity by naming. This consideration defines the ministry of repair in the Reformed tradition as a group of planetary processes. As I will discuss shortly, the work of the PC (U.S.A.) is inherently international. But, by international, we refer to both nations and groups of peoples whose responsibilities to make repairs and whose duty it remains to call for repair demand something of a shift in the way racialism is discussed. Specifically, because colonial harms were inflicted on particular groups, in distinct ways, in order to extract diverse resources and advantages, functional solidarities in the paradigm of repair require a shift from the racist language of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (an indispensable endeavor, itself, in its corrective, protective, and defensive functions) to an operational respect for the names by which historic communities refer to themselves—as themselves, for themselves. The movement for reparations cannot afford to couch its work in the language used by White-dominant institutions seeking to appear more diverse by association with “people of color,” “black and brown bodies,” “minoritized individuals,” “BIPOC,” or “oppressed people.” Such terms are useful in the substantial work of the DEI professional and certain forms of scholarship—obfuscating, at best, in the movement for reparations.

For this reason, the Center for Repair employs what we refer to as a call and response repair ethic. This ethic is inspired by the Community of Caribbean States' (CARICOM) statement instituting the duty of the descendants of those who experience colonial harms to call for the repairs that their experiences require. In response, the Center for Repair does not determine what repair and reparations entail. Instead, the call and response repair ethic instructs the Center for Repair to respond to specific calls to repair historic harms committed in whole or in part by Presbyterians against the Tlingit and Haida nations, the Afro-American people, Indigenous Liberians, Koreans, and Puerto Ricans in addition to harms being experienced by individual Presbyterian congregations and ethnic caucuses.

The Center for Repair's call and response repair ethic also inspires us to encourage the PC (U.S.A.) and others in the ecumenical community—even as we are also learning new solidarities, ourselves—to affirm and amplify Haiti's call for reparations from the nation of France in order to repair the hateful legacies of France's vengeful sabotage and extortion after Haiti's paradigmatic success ridding itself of racial slavery, forever. Our call and response repair ethic further requires that we encourage and assist members of the ecumenical family to collaborate in their response to calls for repair and reparations from the peoples of South Africa, Fiji Islands, Marshall Islands, Zimbabwe, and Caribbean nations, among others. Finally, our call and response repair ethic has inspired the creation of a network called the Alliance for International Repair and Reparations Ecumenical, or, AIRRE. Through AIRRE, the Center for Repair is able to respect the sovereignty and distinction of each group calling for the repair of historical harms while also revealing opportunities for local congregations and faith-based institutions to connect their experiences and work with that of their counterparts nationally and

globally through the ongoing dissemination of information, contacts, encouragement, research, curriculum, liturgical materials, and other resources.

What's Happening Now?

Since its establishment in the Fall of 2022 by the decision of the 225th General Assembly, the Center for Repair has begun responding to multiple calls for repair. In August and October of 2023, The Center for Repair led an interagency delegation to Juneau, Alaska in order to prepare for and offer an official apology and financial reparations for the racist manner in which Memorial Presbyterian Church was closed in 1963, even as the majority Tlingit congregation was steadily growing in numbers. President of the Tlingit and Haida Tribal Association, Richard Peterson, however, made sure that the Center for Repair and the interagency delegation left Alaska with no illusions intact that the shameful series of events that took place in Juneau, Alaska 60 years prior were anything more than the tip of the iceberg. Rather, in the words of Tlingit activist Jerrick Hope-Lang, the town of Sitka is actually “ground zero” for Presbyterian participation in the colonization of Alaska.

In response, the Center for Repair has recently returned from a relationship-building and fact gathering trip to Sitka. We returned not only with new comrades in the work of restorative justice and intercultural re-encounter, but with a deeper appreciation of the ongoing legacy of cultural destruction that Presbyterians studiously inflicted on the Tlingit and Haida peoples of Sitka and new ways to participate in healing. Because Presbyterian activities in Sitka involved intimate and deadly acts of forced assimilation processes, our reparative activities will involve assisting in the repatriation of human remains and sacred objects, assisting in language preservation processes, and discovering our role in revitalizing the tradition of the Clan House.

Within the PC (U.S.A.), itself, the Center for Repair especially enjoys working closely with congregations and mid-councils, many of whom are in the process of discerning how to move from 0 to 1 and onward in their desire to join in the call for transformative reparations legislation nationally, restorative justice initiatives regionally, reparations awareness and advocacy internationally, and creative and reparative approaches to church property and congregational histories locally. The Center for Repair is especially enthusiastic about ongoing collaborations across our six agencies. Work is currently underway across the ethnic caucuses to discern and present recommendations to the General Assembly to support, preserve, and extend the unique witnesses and diverse legacies of *people of color congregations* with a focus on finally securing the resources required to allow vital yet historically neglected and under-resourced congregations to call and install full-time pastoral leadership as soon as possible.

Finally, the Center for Repair is leading the PC (U.S.A.)'s response to a recent call for repair from the Liberia Council of Churches (LCC). As part of the broader work to repair and revivify the denomination's relationship with Presbyterians in West Africa, the Center for Repair is leading the response to the LCC's call to re-examine Presbyterian involvement in the American Colonization Society. This is one method to uncover, admit, assess, and begin to repair colonial legacies set in motion when Presbyterians attempted to preclude multiethnic democracy in the United States by imposing colonial relations on Indigenous Liberians. Among other questions, our response will involve the denomination in a process that will clarify a painful, yet pivotal question: how did Presbyterians' choice to colonize Indigenous Liberians' lands through encouraging, transporting, and supporting African-Americans released from

chattel slavery to rule over the Indigenous peoples contribute to the two cataclysmic civil wars in Liberia that continue to fragment the African diaspora?

Reparations: The Passageway to Reorientation and the Blessed Re-Encounter

Since last year, I have been inspired to revisit a conversation that I had with Associate for Native American Congregational Support, Irvin Porter, who asked, *what might have happened if the Christians who came to this land encountered Indigenous nations as equals capable of responding authentically to the Gospel?* Protestantism forced an encounter between Africans, the Indigenous nations of this hemisphere, and European settlers according to the relational logics of genocide, land and labor theft, and war according to what the Eastern Orthodox Church rightly understands as the superstition of race ideology. Protestants assisted in cultural and biological genocides by demonizing and destroying African and Indigenous cosmologies, even as the European children of the Protestant Reformation were regressing morally as they succumbed to European superstitions about competition, sacrifice, and race to the detriment of the entire planet and all of its inhabitants.

The ministry of repair is our passageway to a re-encounter after centuries of preventable catastrophe. Once the era of decolonial repair is set in motion toward a series of irreversible outcomes; once it becomes clear the Presbyterians intend to participate in a reset that corrects this denomination's originating colonial encounters; the PC (U.S.A) will have Providence to thank for new wellsprings of congregational vitality, a theological renaissance, authentic and transformative interactions between Indigenous traditional cosmologies and Protestant

traditions, and a vivifying local, national, and global witness to new possibilities worthy of being called the Good News.