



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Montclair

*Member of the Unitarian Universalist Association*

Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael, *Senior Co- Minister* | Rev. Scott Sammler-Michael, *Senior Co- Minister*  
67 Church Street, Montclair, New Jersey 07042 | [www.uumontclair.org](http://www.uumontclair.org) |(973) 744-6276

*Grounded in faith, we come together to nurture the soul, inspire hope,  
and bring into being a more just and loving world.*

## **“An Open Letter to Governor Murphy on the need for Reparations in the Slave State of the North”**

Rev. Anya and Rev. Scott Sammler-Michael  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Montclair  
Delivered - March 27, 2022

*Today's sermon is an open letter to Governor Murphy asking him to support and then pass the  
Reparation Task Force Act for New Jersey, Bill A938/S386. Throughout we ask Governor Murphy to  
Say the Word - Reparations, this is the central conviction of the New Jersey Institute of Social Justice  
campaign for the Reparations Task Force Act<sup>1</sup> - that to achieve repair, we need to be willing to at the  
very least, say the word.*

Dear Governor Murphy,

It is an old practice, to write a letter - to put word to paper and let its witness span the  
distance. It is an old practice, one we employ today because we are bearing witness to a  
petition that is itself quite old - having been made now for at least 239 years.

It was 239 years ago, in 1783, that Belinda Sutton (Royall) wrote a letter asking for reparation.  
<sup>2</sup> Ms. Sutton had borne body and soul, 50 years of enslavement before she was finally made a  
freedwoman and fled to Nova Scotia. And then from  
that relatively safe distance she petitioned her state, the commonwealth of Massachusetts, for  
wages for reparation.

And yes, she was awarded a pension of 15 pounds, 12 shillings, to be paid from the estate of  
Isaac Royall, her enslaver.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.njisj.org/saytheword>

<sup>2</sup> <https://royallhouse.org/slavery/belinda-sutton-and-her-petitions/>

Governor Murphy, we address you in worship today because we know that confession is required for atonement. Here we have Faith that Reparation - paying our debts - promotes healing and Beloved Community. Governor, we know that in 1524 Verrazano, an Italian, was the first European to see our state. At that time New Jersey was inhabited by people who called themselves Lenni Lenape - the "Original people." Yet, in 1609 Henry Hudson claimed New Jersey for the Dutch. Gov Murphy, you should also know the Dutch were the financiers of the global slave trade in the 17th Century. Even though they hailed freedoms of religion and of speech, the primary interest of the Dutch was wealth. They enabled the slave trade because it was lucrative. Then, on June 24, 1664, after the English defeated the Dutch, the Duke of York commissioned Lords Berkeley and Carteret to develop the colony known today as New Jersey.

Governor Murphy, you were not a civic leader when this Lenni Lenape land was occupied and colonized, nor when Belinda Sutton that singularly magnificent soul refused to relinquish her labor wholly to the benefit of her enslaver. You didn't have to decide for or against her petition, weighing whether or not doing so might set a precedent for reparation. But now, Governor, the decision has come to you and our legislature. Why?

Because our nation didn't heed Ms. Sutton's example. It buried her with the whole of this torturous history in legions of unanswered petitions, shutting mouths with the terror of lynchings, stilling liberation with the systemization of oppression, focusing on the accumulation of wealth, as if it alone were the holy incarnate.

New Jersey thrived in colonial times, being situated between Philadelphia and New York, cities made wealthy by the products of slave labor. I am sure we need not remind you it was in Paterson, New Jersey, where the American Industrial Revolution began. Soon thereafter, Cotton emerged in the early 1800's as the world's first global 'boom' crop. The USA had a huge price advantage over the rest of the world since much of the labor producing cotton was uncompensated slave labor. New Jersey's prosperity was enmeshed with the cotton industry - shipping, insurance, packaging; machinery, textiles, rum production; transportation, financial markets - all had slavery as their engine. In New Jersey, Bergen County was the slaveholding center. By the late 1700s, enslaved people made up 20% of Bergen's population and 40% of its labor force. I am sure, Governor Murphy, you know that the main reason the United States became the leading economic power of the world is because of labor stolen from the backs and brows of slaves.

Reparations are long overdue; let us say it together. Reparations.<sup>3</sup>

New Jersey is a northern state, yes - it did not secede from the Union in 1861. But New Jersey looked the other way when it came to riches wrought from slavery. Because of the customs of

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<sup>3</sup> As found here:

<https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/essex/montclair/2021/02/28/american-dream-paramus-nj-part-north-jersey-slavery-legacy/4212248001/>

the Dutch, the lack of moral imagination of our leaders, and unchecked greed, New Jersey's history and wealth drips with the evil legacy of chattel slavery. In 1800, there were about 12,000 slaves in our state. By 1830, New Jersey was home to more than two-thirds of the entire slave population of the North. Even when New Jersey outlawed slavery in 1804, "freed" slaves were required to serve lengthy apprenticeships, which weren't much different from slavery.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the last 16 enslaved people in New Jersey were not freed until 1866, when New Jersey finally ratified the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery.<sup>5</sup> Reparations are overdue.

The legal reasoning for Reparations is as strong as its moral clarity. The United States' Constitution has white supremacy baked into it, as simple as "1, 2, 3" - Article 1, section 2, paragraph 3, declares Black Americans non-citizens, declares them to only be worth 3/5's a person, perpetuates the evil of slavery. Yet New Jersey voted to Amend that Constitution. The Equal Justice Clause of the 14th Amendment is one provision suggesting Reparations. But it's in the 13th Amendment where we see that the US Government and all the states were supposed to pay Reparations, 150 years ago! The 13th amendment commanded the states to abolish slavery and eradicate all the "badges and incidents" of slavery.<sup>6</sup> The States, including New Jersey, have yet to heed this requirement to repair racial injustice; this promissory note remains unpaid.

There is no legitimacy to claims that today we have conquered racism. New Jersey, one of the wealthiest states, has the nation's widest racial gaps in wealth, health, incarceration and education. We have never lived into the promise of the 13th amendment, nor General Sherman's Field Order 15, promising each freed slave 40 acres and a mule. These debts must be paid now, and that payment must be guided by first studying Reparations.

So again precedent begs your witness. So today, we pen this letter. Your office was approached by faith and justice leaders. Your ear was turned to this 239 year old petition. You were provided with the undeniable truth of the split between black and white median wealth in New Jersey ~ where white citizens net \$106, 210, while black and latinex citizens net only \$179.<sup>7</sup> You were shown the truth that throughout the Covid Crisis black people have been the most likely to be hospitalized and to die from the disease.

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<sup>4</sup> According to "The Princeton & Slavery Project"

<sup>5</sup> New Jersey ratified the 13th Amendment only *after* 7 Southern states - Georgia, North Carolina, Texas, Florida, Arkansas, Alabama & Virginia.

<sup>6</sup> It is also our view that the 13th Amendment excludes white supremacists from holding any public office or public trust, and that the outcomes of public policy, where racial gaps exist, must be remedied with all deliberate speed. <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/a-common-interpretation-the-thirteenth-amendment>

<sup>7</sup>

[https://assets.nationbuilder.com/njsj/pages/722/attachments/original/1646264260/2022\\_Action\\_Agenda\\_3.3.2\\_2.pdf?1646264260](https://assets.nationbuilder.com/njsj/pages/722/attachments/original/1646264260/2022_Action_Agenda_3.3.2_2.pdf?1646264260)

And you were asked, Governor, will you say the word, Reparation? Now that the cracks of inequity are ravaging your populous in new and undeniable ways, will you champion a Reparations Task Force to study the legacy of slavery and its systemic aftermath, right here in New Jersey? Will you begin the process of repair?

I can't imagine that when you were asked, you did not hear Rev. Dr. King whisper to you from the Birmingham Jail,

*"Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular but one must take it because conscience tells them that it is right."*<sup>8</sup>

But waving off that better angel of your nature you chose politic, you chose safe, you chose popular, and you refused to say the word - *Reparation*. And then quickly, right speedily in fact, you built up a 'wealth disparity task force', and claimed it would do the work.

Belinda Sutton begs to differ, and she, and every soul that has accrued the indignity of this American sin, deserves far more than a reference to the disparity of wealth.

Governor, can't you see, a nation, a state as broken, as implicated as New Jersey, where black children are 21 times more likely to be jailed than white children, even though they commit offenses at similar rates, a state where the black to white infant mortality rate is 3 to 1, the worst in the nation, don't you see that we need repair - that we need a word and a commitment as encompassing as reparation?<sup>9</sup>

Even though wealth disparity is an unholy byproduct of racism, the main issue is not wealth disparity. This is about racial injustice. This is about the theft of lives.

This is not about wealth disparity alone but a disparity of conscience - an absence of care - an erasure of history - a denial of humanity - a refusal of accountability - a history and present travesty that perpetuates white supremacy and legitimizes racial injustice and terror.

Governor Murphy, when faith and justice leaders came to your office they came on the heels of over 239 years of unanswered petitioners; they gave you the chance to drag a portion of this sordid history into the light. That was a blessing laid on your desk. A chance to redeem, to rectify, to repair. But you wouldn't say the word.

Governor, Reparations may only be a word to you, a word that would make some of your constituents uneasy, but is white discomfort reason enough to deny communal repair? We put our faith in reparation. Ignoring black pain to protect white comfort is the definition of America's greatest sin, and it will keep reinventing itself until we commit to repair. Police killings of black citizens now surpass the rate of lynchings during the worst decades of Jim

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<sup>8</sup> Letter from the Birmingham Jail, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King -

[https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/\\_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf](https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>

[https://assets.nationbuilder.com/njisj/pages/722/attachments/original/1646264260/2022\\_Action\\_Agenda\\_3.3.2\\_2.pdf?1646264260](https://assets.nationbuilder.com/njisj/pages/722/attachments/original/1646264260/2022_Action_Agenda_3.3.2_2.pdf?1646264260)

Crow. End the cycle of violence by saying the word and committing New Jersey to the work of repair.

New Jersey wasn't always on the wrong side of things. New Jersey fought for the Union in the Civil War to end slavery. Even though it was the slave state of the North, New Jersey never had laws banning interracial marriage. Yet, despite wars, and civil rights movements, and laws like the Amistad Act requiring the teaching of slavery's history, racism remains locked into New Jersey institutions, customs, habits, and people's hearts. We all know this is true.

And Governor Murphy, we know that you can't do this alone. We know you need us here today speaking our truth to power. And we know you need public support from congregations that have been doing the work of undoing racism for decades, congregations that have made a commitment to build the beloved community, congregations willing to say the word.

And we know that you need Senate President Scutari and Assembly Speaker Coughlin to hold a hearing on this bill. But Governor, Senate President, Assembly Speaker, doesn't it mean anything to you that the entire black caucus is behind this bill, this Reparations Task Force Act... when you are holding still and silent on the other side?

Perhaps it is politic and safe to feign neutrality by avoidance, but it isn't right. Reparations have been paid by this nation to the Japanese survivors and families scourged by internment during World War II. Reparations are paid to first peoples, native Americans forced off their land, subject to genocidal violence. And - not many people know this - Reparations were paid to slave owners when their slaves were emancipated in 1863 - \$300 per slave to the owners for their "loss of property."<sup>10</sup>

Here's the thing: Governor Murphy, this nation has proved that it is willing and able to say the word "reparations" for all kinds of people, but not, not for Black Americans. Until we commit to repair we will suffer the full weight of this sin. It has been asked and it has been denied for 239 years. It is up to you, and to all of us to put our faith in reparations.

Because it is right. Because we are all tied into a single garment of destiny. Because confession is required for righteousness, and reparations are required to make us whole - yes, even for the sins of our fathers. Reparations are a just public remedy, an act of abiding Faith. We have faith in Reparations, and we know, Governor, you can, too. Please publicly support the task force to study Reparations today.

Sincerely,  
Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael  
Rev. Scott Sammler-Michael

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/compensated-emancipation-act/>

## **APPENDIX - MORAL GROUNDING FOR REPARATIONS:**

These readings stand as faithful touchstones from scripture and national history that further compel this action. They are the same readings that Ta-Nehisi Coates chose as preamble to his June 2014 article “The Case for Reparations” that ran in the Atlantic magazine.<sup>11</sup>

### **Deuteronomy, from the Hebrew Scriptures - 15: 12–15, NIV**

“If any of your people— men or women—sell themselves to you, and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free. And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.”

### **From John Locke’s “Second Treatise”**

“Besides the crime which consists in violating the law, and varying from the right rule of reason, whereby a man so far becomes degenerate, and declares himself to quit the principles of human nature, and to be a noxious creature, there is commonly injury done to some person or other, and some other person receives damage by his transgression: in which case he who received any damage, has, besides the right of punishment common to him, a particular right to seek reparation.”

### **From an anonymous black voice speaking in 1861**

“By our unpaid labor and suffering, we have earned the right to the soil, many times over and over, and now we are determined to have it.”

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>