



Imagining Land Justice
Reparations

PRACTICE

Before diving into this guide, consider grounding in these two practices:

- **Take a moment to acknowledge the land you're on,** and its original stewards.
- **Looking back, in order to go forward:** For many, the work of reparations involves a healing of lineages, and a remembering of ancestors. Begin with these two practices: Find out and name the people or events who created discriminatory policies in your tradition. Similarly, name an ancestor whose anti-racist values you admire. Say their name aloud and invoke their spirit and support.





Welcome

Dear Reader,

Welcome to *Imagining Land Justice*! This three-part series is the first publication of the N&N Land Justice Project, an initiative that supports religious communities to create new land legacies rooted in climate resilience and racial justice.

With each generation, the Earth herself is becoming more entangled by extraction and racism: 1500 acres of U.S. land are developed every day, 98% of private land is owned by white people, and our governing systems preserve profit, and white wealth, at all costs.

As sisters discern the future of their properties, many community initiatives – regenerative farms, habitat restoration projects, Black and Indigenous food sovereignty collectives, and beyond—are in search of land to steward, often inhibited by the rising costs of property. Given financial complexities and often unclear options on both sides of this equation, the choices can feel uninspiring, overwhelming, or downright dismal.

But what if we could address the situation differently? What if religious land transitions could repair histories of harm *and* nurture a future of climate-resilient communities?

We believe that this is possible, and that there are tools, models, and friends that can help us get there together. But as the adage goes, we can't go anywhere we haven't already been in our minds. Thus, in *Imagining Land Justice*, we explore critical calls of the climate justice movement—Landback, reparations, and regeneration—and ask: “What is possible?”

These guides are intended as a beginning, not an end. They don't include step-by-step instructions or prescriptive templates. It will be up to each of us to apply them in our own contexts, share with each other in the learning journey, and participate in the opportunities ahead.

For decades, sisters have been “living otherwise,” caring for the needs of the Earth and standing up for justice. We pray that these pages further that legacy, encourage your vision, and amplify the critical role that women religious can continue to play in this transformative moment. May we arrive, with every question and each imagining, one step closer to wholeness.

Onward,
—the N&N Land Justice Team

The Call for Reparations

“If there will ever be a chance for true peace and reconciliation, the Catholic Church must finally declare with all of its might and resources that Black lives do matter. The goal for Black people has never been charity; it is full justice, human rights, freedom and the complete dismantling of white supremacy, beginning with the Church.”

Dr. Shannen Dee Williams

As a country, we have yet to reconcile that our nation was built on stolen lands, with stolen labor. This foundation carries a legacy of violence that continues to this day. Reparations calls for those who have profited from this injustice to repair past and ongoing harms.

Reparations is a call for both spiritual and material restitution for those who have been harmed by oppressive systems. This guide specifically addresses the call for reparations for Black Americans for the harms of slavery and systemic racism. This is a generations-long demand, be-

ginning when the U.S. government broke its promise of “40 acres and a mule” to all formerly enslaved people during Reconstruction.

Like most white institutions in its time period, the American Catholic Church relied upon slavery to fuel its growth. This history dates back to the 15th-century Doctrine of Discovery, which conveyed the Vatican’s authority to “enslave and conquer all non-Christian people.” The Church went on to become the largest corporate slaveholder in parts of the U.S., relying on plantations to fund its clergy and schools.

Black Catholic historian Dr. Shannen Dee Williams points out how racism continued to permeate the Church through segregation and discrimination. To her, the call for reparations not only includes the formal apology for histories of slavery and racism, but to “institutionalize the teaching of Black and Black Catholic history in all areas of church life.” Uplifting these histories gives political and ideological weight that can not only support a national dialogue on reparations, but a theological imagination that uplifts right relationship and collective liberation.

UNDERSTANDING REPARATIONS

At its outset, the journey to reparations can feel daunting, overwhelming, or vague. A helpful place to start might be the [United Nations' five key components of reparations](#):

- **Guarantees of non-repetition:** Making sure the harm can't happen again.
- **Restitution:** Fully restoring the freedom, culture, wealth, etc. that existed before harm was committed.
- **Compensation:** Financial remuneration for damage, in a manner proportional to the gravity of harm.
- **Satisfaction:** Apology and acknowledgment of moral, spiritual and emotional suffering.
- **Rehabilitation:** Providing healing services to those impacted, including psychological, medical, legal, etc.

Within these five elements is a vast field of possibilities for reparations, which will evolve differently depending on the harm experienced and the needs of that community. In his [recent YES! Magazine piece](#), David Ragland contextualizes the UN guidelines specifically for the enslavement of African people.

THE MOST ESSENTIAL ELEMENT

In his book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us that, in all the phrasing and language of race and reparations, it is not a thought experiment, it's not about numbers or a remembrance—"racism is a visceral experience...that lands, with great violence, on the body."

Reparations is not just theory, institutional process, or the simple apology or transfer of wealth. It must be as viscerally lived as the experience of racism itself.

Reparations is a commitment to protecting and defending Black lives, to relinquishing power and control, and an authentic admission of one's place

in a system that has endangered Black people since the very beginning. It demands nothing less than transformation on every level: personal, institutional, and societal. For that reason, the most fundamental element of reparations is relationship.

In the here and now, the movement for reparations seeks to restore the full dignity, belonging, and safety to those harmed; to restore the humanity of those who perpetuated harm; and to rebuild relationship in a severed world.

SNAPSHOTS OF REPARATIONS

In the Movement for Black Lives reparations and policy platform, we see a wide variety of forms of reparations:

- federal and local legislation that addresses the impacts of slavery
- access and control of food sources, housing, and land
- support for homeownership
- direct cash transfers
- high quality educational opportunities
- guaranteed livable income
- healing from physical and mental trauma
- educational curriculum on the impact of slavery and colonization
- funding for the restoration of cultural and sacred sites.

To be considered an example of reparations, these acts would need to be accompanied by an acknowledgment of harm, as well as actions to restore dignity, support healing, and ensure that the harm won't happen again.

Black Land, Black Wealth

“It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill, pledge to charge no more, and then remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Case for Reparations*

In the 150 years since the abolition of slavery, racism has simply evolved into other forms of oppression and domination.

Racism is embodied in the United States through land theft, racial terror, redlining, disenfranchisement, segregation, and mass incarceration — all resulting in major health, educational, and economic disparities for Black people and people of color.

The impacts of these systems of oppression are evident when looking at the **racial wealth gap** in the country. Today, the average net wealth of white families is 10 times that of Black families — and 37% of Black families are reported to have zero wealth. This is not simply a coincidence, but a result of interlocking racist policies across history that have stripped Black people of wealth or the means to build it, and then punished and policed them for being poor.

Slavery continues today through a system of mass incarceration that, in 49 states, legally profits from unpaid labor. Because of heavier and harder policing in Black neighborhoods, it is projected that 1 in 4

Black men will go to prison in their lifetime for a drug offense, despite identical usage rates across racial lines. This has a direct impact on the racial wealth gap: since the “War on Drugs” began in the 1970s, white household wealth has increased by 30%, while Black household wealth *decreased* by 50%.

The same neighborhoods that suffer over-policing are often also “food deserts” — areas without access to affordable, healthy, fresh foods — which are disproportionately located in Black neighborhoods. **With the goal of creating access to healthy foods for their community, a new wave of Black regenerative farming and food sovereignty collectives have emerged across the United States.**

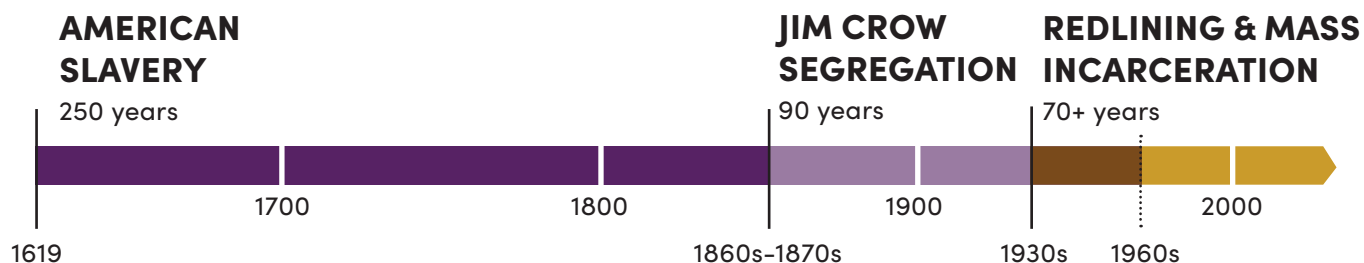
One of these farmers is Leah Penniman, who started Soul Fire Farm with her husband when there weren’t enough fresh food options in their neighborhood. Soul Fire is an 80-acre farm in Grafton, New York, as

“Being a farm owner or farm manager is one of the whitest professions in the United States. And being a farm worker is the brownest profession in the United States. And that’s not some accident of history.”

Leah Penniman

“Slavery didn’t end. It just evolved.”

—Bryan Stevenson



well as a nonprofit organization that trains farmers of color in regenerative and Afro-Indigenous farming methods. In other words, they teach farming that actually builds soil health, mitigates climate change, and reclaims the connection to land that was stolen in the trauma of enslavement and sharecropping.

“The sixteen-to-one wealth gap [exists] because of inherited property—and inherited property from a legacy of discrimination,” [shared Penniman](#) in an interview. In fact, a staggering 98 percent of rural land is owned by white people, and Black people have lost more than 14 million acres of land to discrimination and violence since 1920.

With the racial wealth gap, the rising cost of land, and a lack of property, most young farmers of color are often stuck leasing their land instead of owning it. Not only does this keep them from building wealth, but it means their entire livelihood — their farm and the soil health they’ve built — could be taken away at any time.

To help address this problem, Soul Fire and the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust launched the online [Reparations Map for Black-Indigenous Farmers](#), an open call for “reparations of land and resources so that we can grow nourishing food and distribute it in our communities.” The map highlights farmers of color across the country and their various

needs, which range from land to equipment to financial support. “We are so excited about this powerful opportunity for people to people solidarity,” the map concludes.

This is one example of many creative possibilities within the call for reparations. At its core, reparations is an opportunity to direct unfairly accumulated wealth toward the healing and sovereignty of oppressed people — as well as of the land itself.

THE RACIAL WEALTH GAP

- In the U.S., the median white family has \$147,000. The median Black family has \$3,500 — 2 percent of its white counterpart.
- 98 percent of all rural land, and 95 percent of urban land, is owned by white people.
- 37 percent of Black households have zero wealth — more than 2x that of white people.
- 62 percent of Black working-age people don’t have any savings for their retirement.
- On average, a white child born in the U.S. has 16x more wealth than a Black child at first breath.



Reparations in Action

Within the last few years, some communities of faith have begun to enact reparations programs and efforts. Imagine what is possible as more communities research their own material involvement in enslavement and colonization, teach these histories, and make amends.

STARTING WITH APOLOGY

In July 2020, the **Leadership Conference of Women Religious** embarked on a five-year journey to address systemic racism and white privilege, which emerged after dialogues with leaders of the National Black Sisters' Conference.

At the LCWR Assembly in 2021, President Elise García, OP centered her keynote address on the topic of white supremacy and the need for healing. She was then joined by the president-elect, past president, and executive director of LCWR in a ritual of repentance. While much work lies ahead of them, Sr. Elise asserted the importance of beginning by “carving deeply needed words of repentance into [sisters'] evolutionary path.”

LAND REPARATIONS

In their Reparations Map, members of the Northeast Farmers of Color Network call for the reparations of land and resources “to grow nourishing food and distribute it in [our] communities.”

They maintain a map of farming and food justice programs that are open to reparations in the form of land, money, and other resources. Check out the map and other resources at www.nunsandnones.org/imagine.



LEFT: *We Speak Your Names*, a ceremony to remember those the RSCJ community had enslaved. (photo: Religious of the Sacred Heart)

“Reparations is a healing project, a midway point between truth and reconciliation.”
David Ragland

“Slavery and its legacy...removed African people from under the cover of God. We’re not just talking about a broken contract. This is a broken covenant.”
Woullard Lett

SISTERS OF THE SACRED HEART ENGAGE IN “MULTI-DECADE” JOURNEY

From the founding of its schools until emancipation, the **Society of the Sacred Heart** enslaved approximately 150 people in Louisiana and a few dozen more in Missouri. Over the past six years, the Society has worked to locate the descendants of those the Society had enslaved and embark on a “multi-decade” journey of reparations. Their steady, relational steps toward repair have included:

- Contracting external facilitators skilled in racial justice work within religious communities
- Making their archival information available online, so that other descendants might access their ancestors’ information more easily.
- Erecting a monument to the enslaved persons in Louisiana, and supporting descendants to create and attend a ritual of remembrance at the site.
- Launching the Cor Unum Scholarship to provide tuition assistance to African American students.
- Ongoing racial justice training for all community members.

BUILDING BIPOC WEALTH

In 2021, the **Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration** decided to invest \$1M of their impact investment funds in Apis & Heritage, a fund designed to help close the racial wealth gap by transitioning businesses with large workforces of color into 100% employee-owned enterprises.

In the U.S. today, 60% of Black and 65% of Latinx workers have \$0 in retirement assets. Through A&H-assisted buyouts, employees of these businesses — including elder care, commercial cleaning, and landscaping — become worker-owners, and are projected to accrue retirement savings of \$70,000–\$120,000 each.

JESUIT REPARATIONS

In 2019, after three years of public acknowledgment and visits with descendants, Georgetown University launched an annual \$400,000 fund for reparations to descendants of enslaved people that the university once claimed. They also established the Georgetown Slavery Archive, new classes and memorialization efforts, and an ongoing, facilitated dialogue process between Georgetown, the Society of Jesus, and Descendant Leaders.

In addition, in 2021, the Jesuits pledged to create a fund of \$100 million to support racial healing initiatives and reparations to descendants.

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**“Our mission has always been about healing. This work is a part of that mission: We are shifting wealth, closing the racial wealth gap, and trying to help transform the economy.”**

**Sr. Sue Ernster, FSPA**

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Taking Next Steps

LEARN

- **Open your archives for research.** What do you know about your own community's relationship to slavery? Work with archivists and researchers to understand your community's early history in the United States.
- **Learn about the racial wealth gap.** The net wealth of an average white family is nearly ten times that of a Black family. These unequal dynamics are a direct result of the ways that white supremacy has directly shaped our current economic conditions. Set aside time to read and discuss [Dreams Deferred](#), a report on the racial wealth gap.
- **Deepen your understanding of current calls and frameworks for reparations.** Check out [The Movement For Black Lives's comprehensive Reparations Toolkit](#), with examples for individuals, organizations, and institutions. Read the [text of the H.R. 40 Bill](#) that would establish the "Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans" at a federal level.

REFLECT

- **Connect to community values and sacred text.** Bring forward a fundamental excerpt of your community's constitution or commitments. Perhaps it is the articulation of your charism, the text of the the vow of poverty, a list of critical social or environmental concerns, a Gospel text, or something else. Meditating on the text, ask how your community's values and commitments might connect to the call for reparations.
- **Learn to move through discomfort.** Engaging in anti-racist work can bring up feelings of defensiveness or discomfort, especially for white people. By learning how to spot these patterns and move through them, white people can show up more fully for the work of solidarity. Good starting resources include [My Grandmother's Hands](#), [Dear White Christians](#), and [How to Be an Antiracist](#).



NOTE: Many [highlighted resources](#) are available at www.nunsandnones.org/imagine, as well as extra resources not mentioned in this guide.

TAKE ACTION

- **Research, connect with, and support Black farmers and land stewards in your area.** Ask friends, reach out to our team, or check out resources like the [Black-Indigenous Reparations Map](#) to get started. See if there are ways to show up in solidarity by donating, volunteering, or amplifying their efforts.
- **Advocate for HR 40.** The H.R. 40 Act would establish a commission to research reparations programs and propose a path forward for federal reparations. Reintroduced in 2021, the bill has a renewed surge of support. Contact your Member of Congress through the [ACLU action platform](#) to urge their support. Use your institutional power to advocate for H.R. 40.
- **Take the Grassroots Reparations Pledge:** [The Reparationist Pledge of Accountability](#) is a tool of personal and communal accountability “to remain faithful to the sacred work of reparations.” The pledge is the first step in the Grassroots Reparations Campaign, which also includes invitations to learn about reparations, take political action, and connect as a community committed to reparations.
- **Decide on a path of reparations** that’s shaped by your community’s context and that’s rooted in real relationships. If you are responding to a specific act of harm by your community, work alongside direct descendants. Otherwise, focus on shifting wealth toward local organizing or collective action focused on supporting future generations of Black life and health.
- **Consider your land legacy.** Look at the examples in these pages, and the tools highlighted on Page 9 of our [Landback guide](#), and the examples and scenarios in the [Regenerate the Commons](#). Bring these ideas into your discernment about property with a spirit of creativity and repair.
- **Organize others.** Communities of women religious can use their significant moral authority to call for a deeper reckoning with the Catholic Church’s ties to chattel slavery. By inviting the broader public to join in learning and taking action, we can create momentum for the broader reparations movement.

BELOW: Soul Fire Farm is uprooting racism and seeding sovereignty in the food system. (photo: Soul Fire Farm)



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