



First Parish of Arlington Unitarian Universalist  
Reckoning & Repair  
Resource Kit



**RECKONING&REPAIR**

First Parish Unitarian Universalist | Arlington, MA



## Reckoning and Repair Resource Kit

Welcome to the journey! This resource kit, created by the Reckoning and Repair working group, contains information to help you make an informed decision on voting to adopt the Affirmation of Reckoning and Repair at the Annual Meeting on May 19th.

### Background:

The congregation first learned that some of the congregation's founding members were enslavers in the fall of 2022. The Racial Justice Convening Committee formed the working group Reckoning and Repair to fully consider the historical implications of this fact, and a modern-day contextual understanding of why it still matters. None of us could have imagined how challenging but also how rewarding this work would be.

For the past two years, the Reckoning & Repair working group has drafted a brief historical narrative, held listening sessions, partook in one-on-one conversations with many members, gathered and incorporated your feedback and shared our findings, as well as hopes for the future, with the larger congregation. The Affirmation that will be considered for adoption at the annual meeting (see page 6) serves to acknowledge the harm done to enslaved people by our forebears but also avows our promise to mitigate as best we can that harm. Over the past year members of RJCC and the Reckoning & Repair working group have continued the conversation by sharing, and learning, and discussing our future together with all FPUUA members and friends.

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# **Narrative Of Reckoning and Repair at First Parish UU Arlington**

## **History:**

Since its inception in 1739, the First Parish congregation of Arlington has had a complex and multifaceted history. Though there have been times of great joy and good work, there have also been times of significant harm and inequity: our congregation's original wealth has been entangled with the institution of slavery, which began with the founding of the congregation in 1739.

When residents of the Northwest Cambridge Precinct built our Meetinghouse in the early eighteenth century, it was legal for white colonists to enslave Africans. At the time, more than half of our congregation's sixteen founding members or their families enslaved Black people. For example, one of our founding members and major financier, Jason Russell, enslaved a woman named Kate in his home from the time of her infancy to her death. While history has celebrated the Russell family, Kate and other enslaved people have been ignored. In fact, there is significant evidence that she and others are buried in an unmarked grave in the Old Burying Ground.

## **Acknowledgement:**

First Parish Unitarian Universalist of Arlington previously whitewashed the past; which is to say, we have told our history from the point of view of white identity. This retelling excused violence and erased our institution's historic ties to slavery. In order to create a beloved community and build a better future that is rooted in justice and inspired by love, we break past silences and name our congregation's involvement with the institution of slavery. We have benefited financially and socially from our founders' wealth, based in part on the uncompensated contributions of the labor, resources, skills, and talents of enslaved people through our initial endowment.

In recognizing our congregation's benefit from enslavement, we are responsible to mitigate, to the best of our ability, the harm caused to enslaved people by our forebears. We are committed to reckoning and repair.

## **Commitment:**

Naming it is not enough, we commit to ongoing racial justice work and reconciliation. We commit to a process of reparations as allies with the African American community and the ongoing, broader reparations movement. We promise to work within and beyond our congregation's walls to bring about holistic repair and accountability.

The process of reparations and repair that we engage in may include the following actions: taking the lead from Arlington's MLK Planning Committee, and through them committing financial support to a local scholarship fund for African American youth; acknowledging publicly First Parish's history of enslavement and its commitment to repair and reparations; assessing the loss of generational wealth to enslaved people in Arlington; engaging in naming or renaming of Arlington streets and squares for the enslaved Africans who lived in Arlington.

We acknowledge that the longer-term process of reparations and repair involves reconstructing society. True repair means overcoming a world of racism, war, and widening inequality by building a beloved community based on justice, care, and uplift. We commit ourselves to this evolving process of repair.

## ***Rationale in support of Affirmation***

The need for reparations for the harms done by slavery has come to the forefront in many communities and congregations around the country in recent years, in particular since the 2019 Congressional hearing on reparations. Our recent uncovering of facts calls us to this work now.

For several decades, First Parish members have studied and grappled with the interrelated evils of systemic racism. Since 2021, study and research have helped us identify our own congregation's involvement with slavery, beginning in its formative years. What began as a narrative intended to help us all better understand the congregation's history with slavery and its legacy has led to the Affirmation we hope to adopt today. This Affirmation will serve as a foundation for First Parish to act to address past wrongs while working with others to repair and uplift. It will provide a reminder of our acknowledgment of past injustices and our necessary commitment to justice in the present and future. The Affirmation establishes a process of engaging in acts of repair and reparations\*, and will always involve the decision-making of the congregation and the Parish Committee.

This Affirmation is only a first small step on a longer journey of implementing an effective strategy to reckon and repair. The time is now for our community to turn understandings into actions.

\* The United Nations defines reparations as “...**measures to redress violations of human rights by providing a range of material and symbolic benefits to victims or their families as well as affected communities.**” This framework includes restitution, rehabilitation, compensation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/transitional-justice>

***Draft Motion on  
Affirmation of Reckoning and Repair  
for Annual Meeting***

**Motion:** That we adopt the following **Affirmation of Reckoning and Repair** (see next page) as a guidance document for First Parish UU of Arlington to begin reckoning with past entanglements with slavery and committing to repair.

*Affirmation (What we'll actually be voting to adopt at the Annual Meeting)*

Affirmation of Reckoning and Repair  
First Parish Unitarian Universalist of Arlington

Acknowledgement:

To create beloved community, rooted in justice and inspired by love, we break past silences and name our congregation's entanglement with the institution of slavery, which began with the founding of the congregation in 1739. At least eight of First Parish's sixteen original pew owners enslaved Black people, and our initial congregation was founded in part on the uncompensated labor, resources, skills, and talents of enslaved people.

Commitment:

First Parish Unitarian Universalist of Arlington is committed to building relationships with local, Black-led organizations to shape a framework for meaningful reparations. We commit to a process of reparations guided by people of African heritage and the broader reparations movement, and we will work within and beyond our congregation's walls to bring about holistic repair. In tandem with seeking out and forming relationships with Black-led organizations, the Reckoning & Repair working group will continue gathering congregational feedback about a plan for reparations. All annual fiscal decisions will be made by the appropriate committees within the congregation, while all longer-term fiscal commitments will be made by a congregational vote.

Reparations are central to the struggle to build a world based on justice, care, and uplift, and we commit ourselves to this work. Hand in hand we will find a way.

April 16, 2024

## Appendix

### Historical Detail:

The growing wealth of our town and region was part of a colonial mercantile system that was entwined with slavery. Shipping, banking, and agriculture in the region supported and profited from the triangle trade. Other industries (including textile production), as well as political, cultural, educational, and religious institutions, were integrated into this mercantile system that relied on the labor of enslaved people.

Slavery was part of an economic system — mercantilism followed by capitalism — that created large inequalities of wealth and power. Such inequalities are self-perpetuating unless people organize to change this unfair system. Though progress has been made, Black Americans today still face racial disparities in health, housing, education, income, generational wealth, safety, and well-being that are all rooted in slavery.

In dialogue with Black people and Black-led organizations, we will discern which specific acts of reparation are suitable and helpful; our understandings and actions are likely to evolve over time. Since examples can aid with communication, here are some suggestions that have been offered. (The R&R working group is grateful to everyone who has offered suggestions and possibilities for reparations.)

### Resources:

Suggested resources will change over time, as we learn more about reparations from the Black community.

#### Suggested Congregational Resources:

- Publicly acknowledging that slavery existed in Arlington and elsewhere, that some of the earliest members of our congregation enslaved people, and that our congregation has benefited in many ways from slavery and its legacies
- Directing no less than a quarter of all *Giving First* contributions to Black-led organizations
- Designating an annual holiday offering to an organization that addresses racial injustice and inequity.
- Ensuring our policy of providing free rental space to groups run by or serving people of color is well-known in the community.
- Building relationships with local Black-led organizations to ensure First Parish is receptive to their voices
- Affirming the inherent worth and dignity of Black people in our language, music, visual images, and other aspects of congregational life
- Regularly inviting Black guest preachers, speakers, and musicians to share their perspectives with our congregation
- Featuring Black composers and authors regularly in worship, providing context for their lives and their work

#### Suggested Financial and Other Resources:

- Donating a percentage of the interest generated from our endowed funds to Black-led organizations.
- Creating a special fund through donations and fundraisers that would be donated to Black-led organizations or initiatives in Arlington.
- Investing First Parish's Trust Funds with the intention of these funds being used to promote equity in our world as well as income for our congregation.

*After reviewing these pages, please feel free to reach out to members of the R&R working group listed below with your comments, questions, and concerns.*

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