

# L.A.'s black clergy join call for slave reparations

By Dennis Freeman  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Los Angeles (NNPA)—Once again the Black church is being called to the forefront of another major issue regarding the African-American community. This time the Black church is being asked to play a role in the slave reparations movement.

Recently, in front of a standing room only crowd in the First A.M.E. Church plaza, the Black church officially became a lead member of the reparation movement team.

Local clergy members convened a special panel to discuss their role in the growing reparations movement.

The day-long event, hosted by First A.M.E. Senior Pastor Cecil "Chip" Murray, included guest panelists Minister Tony Muhammad from the Nation of Islam; Bishop Henry Williamson of C. M. E. Church; Rev. William Epps of Second Baptist Church; Rev. Norman Copeland of Ward A.M. E. Church; and Rev. Lorna Cross of First A.M. E.

The forum, "Reparations and the Black Faith Community," drew more than 300 people, and left some standing outside trying to look in.

The purpose was to discuss the role of the church—if any—and how it will play in the modern reparations movement.

The Commission to Study Reparations Proposals for African Americans Act, better known as H.R. 40, has stirred a national debate about the atrocities of slavery and possible payments to slave descendants. The resolution gained strong support from local clergy attending the forum.

The key, those in the movement say, is to inform more people about reparations.

"We need minds like the ones at this table, minds like yours so that the young people that came out today need to know why they're in the conditions they're in," said Bishop Henry Williamson. "We need to discuss reparations so that our own people will understand, and quit blaming themselves for the hell we find ourselves in."

Williams also clarified, for those contending that reparations and affirmative action are one and the same, the difference between the two.

"Affirmative action, while

good and necessary, will benefit those that are prepared," Williams said. "But what about those who have been eradicated, and who are stuck at the bottom? That's why you have to have reparations. Affirmative action is something that's due. Reparations is a fortune that's owed. It's time for them to show us the money."

Rev. William Epps echoed Williams definition.

"If you can provide reparations for the Indians, then why not pay us?" he asked.

H.R. 40, which was authored by U.S. Rep. John Conyers in 1989, has steadily gained momentum in the last few years towards possible congressional passage. Four major cities (Atlanta, Cleveland, Chicago and Detroit) have had city councils pass resolutions in support of H.R. 40. The bill now has at least 40 co-sponsors who support it.

Conyers, in numbering the bill H. R. 40, made it as a symbol of the 40 acres and a mule promised to freed slaves.

The ideas of H.R. 40, which is divided into four provisions, is to recognize the injustice and inhumanity of slavery, establish a commission to study slaves, study the impact of those forces on African-Americans today, and then have the commission make recommendations to Congress on appropriate remedies.

After a slow start in which it went virtually unnoticed for a while, H.R. 40 is generating a lot of buzz around the country. Its impact has even been felt in corporate America.

Hartford-based insurance giant Aetna, Fleet Boston Financial Corp., and railway company CSX, are now the subjects of a federal lawsuit filed last year, resulting from those companies benefiting financially from slavery.

More lawsuits against other large corporations that similarly benefited from slavery are expected to be filed.

Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), who filled in as the keynote speaker at the reparations symposium for Conyers, who could not attend, said many people have enjoyed the fruits of slave labor.

"Everyone has profited from the labor of slavery, even later immigrants," Waters said. "Slave labor built this infrastructure."

Speaking on several topics that she feels is affecting

the Black community in Los Angeles, but tying them directly and indirectly to the reparations movement, Waters said it's time for African-Americans to do more than just talk. She said its time for them to act. Waters specifically targeted the problem with payday lenders, which she said is choking the life out of the Black community.

"I don't believe you're ready for reparations until you march en mass to the payday lenders and tell them 'don't come back,'" Waters told the audience. "They are sucking out our assets."

"They are sucking out our potential. Everybody with a

trick finds their way to the Black community because you're asleep. God knows the power we would have if we moved in mass."

With reparations payouts to other cultures that had suffered wrongdoing and injustice, many African-Americans feel their time is due to get what is owed from the horrendous conditions of slavery, which started in 1619 and lasted until 1865.

Japanese Americans were compensated \$1.2 billion for atrocities launched against them by the United States government during World War II. Germany had to make restitution to Jewish descen-

dants for their role in the Holocaust. And, there are other examples of reparation payments from one country to another for human crimes against them.

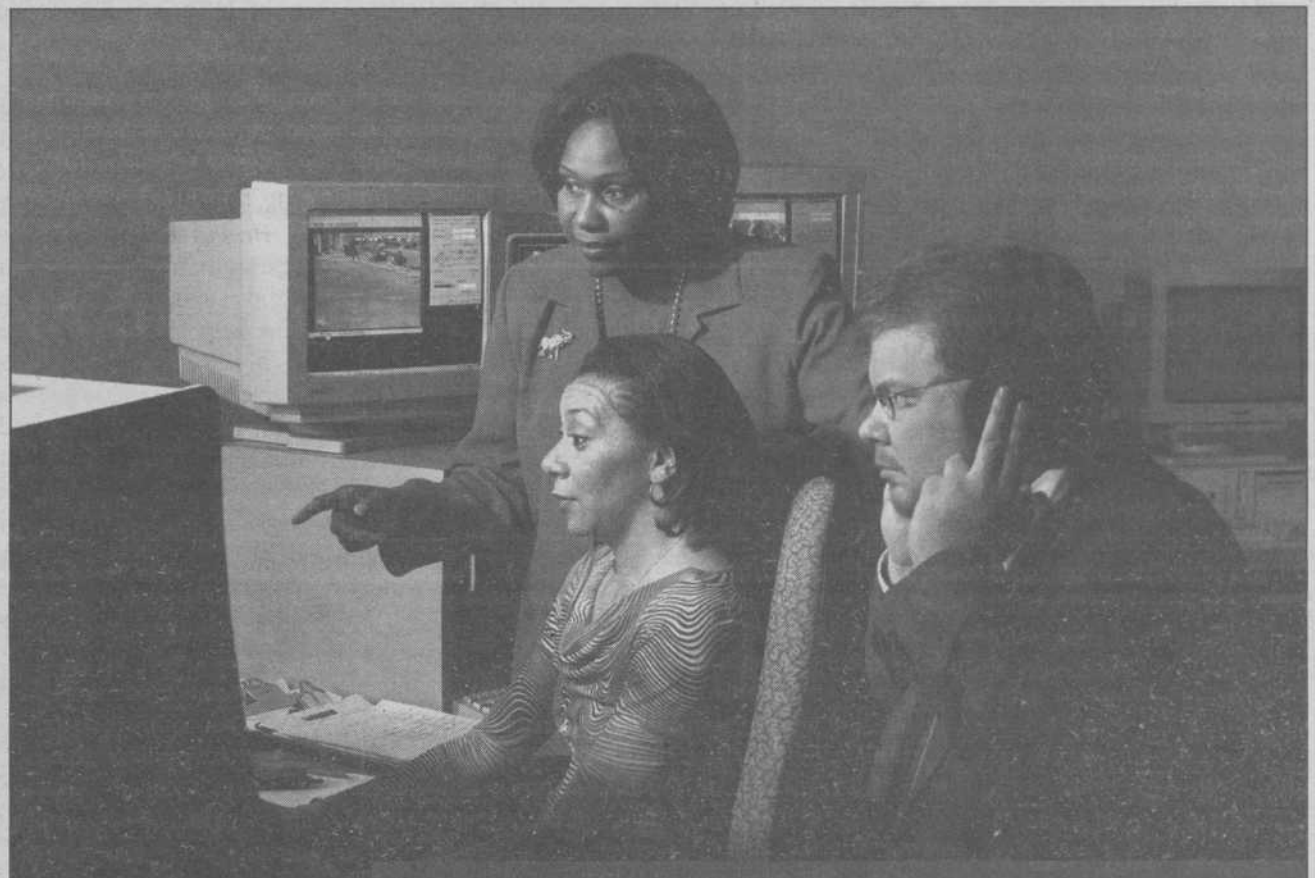
Today, Blacks, descendants of Africans who were imported as slaves to America, want the same type of reparations. With the United States government making slavery legal at one time, and Whites profiting economically from the backs of slaves, African-Americans feel the country should acknowledge its wrongdoing and pay up.

But Minister Tony Muhammad cautions that

Blacks shouldn't be too ecstatic about a possible reparation victory.

"I hope we are prepared for the answer, which will be no," Muhammad said. "What if they said no, 'we aren't giving you nothing.' What are you prepared to do?"

Waters said the reparations movement isn't just about pocketing money. "We must be clear that reparations is not simply about a check to individuals," Waters said. "The call for reparations represents a commitment to examine a constructive dialogue of the rule of slavery and racism in shaping America's society."



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