

## Draft overture to Pittsburgh Presbytery

Whereas, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church is the oldest congregation of color in Pittsburgh, having been founded in 1808;

And whereas, this thriving and vital Christian congregation for generations carried out a witness to Christ through service to the extensive and vibrant African-American community of the Lower Hill neighborhood through provision of respite and refuge for escaped slaves seeking emancipation through the Underground Railroad; guidance, education, and housing for migrants from the South; providing a center for convocations of community concern, such as civil rights and police brutality; Sunday school classes attended by thousands; housing Pittsburgh's first Black elementary school; serving as a partner of Wilberforce University; and many more activities;

And whereas, Bethel AME obtained land adjacent to Pittsburgh's Downtown at a time when African Americans were legally and socially restricted from doing so, and built a large, Romanesque-style church accommodating 1,900 members, creating a physical manifestation of the glory of God and hope for God's people in the Lower Hill;

And whereas, in the 1950s the Urban Redevelopment Agency of the City of Pittsburgh seized Bethel AME Church through eminent domain and razed it, despite city statutes prohibiting the use of eminent domain to "appropriate, take, injure or destroy any church property";

And whereas, the congregation of Bethel AME strenuously objected and exercised every available legal means to prevent the loss of their church building and the forced removal to a less central, accessible location;

And whereas, the destruction of Bethel AME's church building and "urban renewal" of the Lower Hill permanently displaced and dispersed the congregation's 3,000 members;

And whereas, Bethel AME received \$240,000 in compensation, an amount far below the value of land (not including the air rights) for property on the edge of Downtown, and considerably less than the value accruing to the Pittsburgh Penguins;

And whereas, a church with a predominantly white congregation located two blocks away was not seized by eminent domain and not destroyed;

And whereas, no historically or predominantly white congregation in Pittsburgh or in Allegheny County spoke up on behalf of their sisters and brothers in Christ who were involuntarily and forcibly deprived of their church building;

And whereas, the URA and the Sports and Exhibition Authority (a city/county entity), current owners of the land, are making plans for the property with the Penguins, operating as the Pittsburgh Arena Real Estate Redevelopment LP (PAR), which hold the development rights for the land;

And whereas, the Pittsburgh Arena Real Estate Redevelopment LP, in turn, is working with the developer Buccini/Pollin Group on a \$1 billion redevelopment of the former Civic Arena site, including a 26-story modern office tower that will serve as a corporate headquarters for First National Bank;

And whereas, Bethel AME Church seeks reparations from the City of Pittsburgh, which seized its property; from the Pittsburgh Penguins organization, which stands to financially benefit from the property; and from local religious communities, especially those that could have come to Bethel's aid in the 1950s and did not;

Be it hereby the decision and the intention of Pittsburgh Presbytery to:

Endorse the Bethel AME reparations campaign;

As a covenanted community in Christ, directly raise the concerns of our sisters and brothers in Christ at Bethel AME with City officials, including the Urban Redevelopment Agency, and the Pittsburgh Penguins organization;

And make a financial contribution to support the Bethel AME reparations campaign.

<https://www.publicsource.org/bethel-ame-black..>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zsdu7kAGj4E>