



ST. JOHN'S NORWOOD

Bethesda - Chevy Chase

## A Faith-Driven Response to the Legacy of Slavery and Racism

### Preamble

*And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God – Micah 6:8*

The principles underlying this statement – respect for the dignity of every human being, love of neighbor, and our commitment as Christians to work for justice and shalom for all – are universal. We acknowledge that many in our society have suffered great injustice, and we are committed, as we enter our 150th year as a faith community, to respond to all with faithful action.

*This document is intended as a living statement of St. John's commitment to respond to the particular history and legacy of chattel slavery in the United States and its impact on our Black siblings. It is intended to be a source of optimism, aspiration and change.*

St. John's has historically demonstrated little recognition of the ways that we have directly and indirectly benefited from systemic racism and the ways that we have contributed to its continuation---by what we have done and what we have left undone. We believe that this is morally wrong. With humility and with God's help, we consciously choose a different path. We commit our hearts and resources to actively joining the struggle for racial justice and equity in our parish, our community, and our nation. Our

mission is to secure shalom, God's vision of true equity and relational wholeness for all.

In this year of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. John's founding, we will be "Acknowledging Our Past, Embracing Our Future." For more than half a dozen years, our justice ministries have facilitated discussions on race and social justice, educated our parish, featured the important work done by our archivist on our church's racist history, and made timely calls to action through action alerts and chronicling our social justice initiatives. Our outreach and justice ministries have worked with intention to expand into affected communities. All this, and more, leads us to formally state our belief in the sanctity of all human beings, to acknowledge the reality of the injustices caused by systemic racism, and to take action that fosters "justice and peace among all people," as we pledge in our Baptismal Covenant.

The Vestry of St. John's Norwood  
February 2023

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## **~Beliefs**

*A new command I give you: Love one another.*

*As I have loved you, so you must love one another. - John 13:34*

We believe that all people are sacred and cherished equally by God. No human group or culture is inherently superior to another. Every person is a beloved child of God. God calls us to respect the dignity of every human being. Therefore, we pledge to renounce the sin of racism and the division of people into superficial categories, and we pledge to acknowledge the full humanity of all people.

We believe that God calls all people to liberate the oppressed and speak truth to power. Therefore, we pledge to renounce silence in the face of the cries of our neighbor for justice and equity.

We believe that God wants shalom for all people. Therefore, we strive to renounce any benefit from injustice through systems that privilege only some and not all. We pledge not to accept a society that caters to the needs and perspectives of only some people rather than working to create greater equity, inviting everyone to the tables where decisions are made. Working to end racism is an essential part of this.

We believe that God's call to do justice is urgent. Therefore, we pledge to renounce responding with ambivalence to God, intellectualizing the suffering of others, and rationalizing inaction.

We believe that the work of ending racism in our communities is a calling for all of us. Therefore, we pledge to renounce leaving for others the hard work that is ours to do.

### **~Acknowledgement**

*You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. - John 8:32*

We acknowledge that chattel slavery played a major role in the establishment and development of our nation and our community. Its legacy continues today. The racial discrimination that was present at the foundation of the nation continues to inform and shape our laws and social frameworks and reinforces systems of inequality.

We acknowledge that this nation and our community have a historical pattern of using their systems to preserve white dominance and power, legacies of which continue today. Black people have been and are systematically marginalized through policies, laws, cultural norms, and practices that make it impossible for them to live authentically and with equal rights. This marginalization not only has limited access to housing, food, health and healthcare, education, employment, infrastructure, wealth, justice, political representation, and more but also has touched every aspect of daily life, large and small.

We acknowledge that the Episcopal Church in America has been complicit in racial discrimination, using the Bible itself to justify segregation, oppression, and white supremacy. We acknowledge that many Episcopal institutions were built with enslaved people's labor and that many benefited

financially from the oppression of others. Legacies of all this continue today.

We acknowledge the racist roots of our own parish. St. John's was founded in 1873 by some families in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase area, a number of whom had been enslavers (including the families who gave the land and those who signed the deed), and a former Confederate chaplain, who grew up on a slave-owning plantation, was our first rector. In the early 1900s, St. John's congregation accepted an overtly racist rector who published his bigoted opinions on a regular basis. Until recently, St. John's as a church has not been active enough in advocating specifically for racial justice and equity. We acknowledge that the reluctance to take action is itself an action with consequences and that silence on such matters represents not only complacency but also complicity.

We acknowledge that St. John's stood silent when the founders of the neighborhoods surrounding our church were part of an effort to exclude Black people from buying homes and that later residents used many methods, both formal and informal, to continue this exclusion for decades. This behavior created a continuing pattern of housing segregation in our area that prevented Black people from taking advantage of the financial, educational, employment, and other opportunities and privileges that residents of our neighborhoods continue to enjoy today.

We acknowledge the need to create worship spaces and spiritual communities that invite and welcome others. We affirm, in the words of our Bishop, the Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde, the "need to preserve the best of our Episcopal traditions while welcoming the stranger, listening, and learning from those whose worship experiences are different from ours," in order to create a community that reflects the true breadth and rich diversity of the Episcopal Church.

## **~Action**

*Will you strive for justice and peace among all people,  
and respect the dignity of every human being? I will, with God's help.*

*- Baptismal Covenant, Book of Common Prayer*

We commit to work for racial justice and equity and view this task as an urgent call of the Gospel for us today.

We commit to becoming a church community that pursues and embodies, in word and deed, the work of actively opposing racism by advocating for economic, political, and social change.

We commit to a path of achieving racial justice and equity in America that includes addressing and transforming the systemic root causes of racial injustice---economic, political, and social.

We commit to holding ourselves and one another accountable in love to the highest level of respect for the dignity of all people, striving to exemplify to one another how to truly love our neighbor.

We commit consciously and intentionally to working in partnership with affected communities to end racial injustice. We commit to educating ourselves and listening deeply and with humility to people who would like to share their experiences.

We commit to identifying restorative initiatives that level the playing field so that racial equity can be ever more fully achieved.

We commit to examining our church's practices, policies, and traditions for any systemic obstacles and to moving toward a full embodiment of the Episcopal Way of Love, building a community where all people see themselves welcomed and reflected.

We commit ourselves as a church to an ongoing journey of education and self-examination on issues of race and equity.

We commit to identifying and removing explicit or implicit messages of white supremacy from our religious and institutional symbols.

We commit to examining our individual and personal implicit biases and positions of privilege so that we can become Beloved Community in cooperation, authenticity, and integrity.

We commit to striving for shalom for all as lifelong work---over the course of our own lives and in the life of the parish. We will invite new members of

our community to join our commitment to this work as a matter of faithful living.

We will continue our ongoing good works and direct our energy to building together an action plan of intentional additional work to this end.

We believe that our efforts, rooted in our faith and our commitment to respect the dignity of every human being, to strive for shalom for all will make a difference in our church, our community, and our world.

Note: Please [click here](#) for the Glossary of Terms.