

## **Charter for the Metropolitan Detroit Truth & Reconciliation Commission on Racial Inequality**

*"Without Truth, no Healing; without Forgiveness, no Future"  
South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission*

*There comes a time in the life of every community when it must look honestly and seriously into its past in order to provide the best possible foundation for moving into a future based on healing and hope; a future that is consistent with the United States of America's founding promise of equality and opportunity for all.*

Truth and Reconciliation will only be possible if individuals and institutions can engage together in processes to promote justice and racial healing. This process needs to take place everywhere, but it is particularly necessary in Detroit and Southeast Michigan.

The analysis of "truth" in relation to race must begin with recognition of the long history of racial oppression of people of color by individuals, structures and institutions.

While the history of racial tyranny is well documented, what is less appreciated is how locally based institutions, organizations and structures may embody, reinforce and reproduce patterns of racial privilege and oppression.

Patterns of racial privilege and oppression were present when Michigan first became a Territory and a State. The original native populations were displaced and forcibly removed from their land. Free African Americans, but not white persons, were required by the Territory of Michigan to post a \$500 bond in order to remain in the territory. Michigan allowed whites to own African American slaves. Moreover, in spite of the State's noteworthy record as a stop on the Underground Railroad, Michigan law enforcement officials actively enforced the Federal Fugitive Slave Act.

Some suggest that these same patterns of racial privilege and oppression persist, although in shifting forms and guises. The Civil Right Movement helped remove crasser forms of intentional discrimination, such as those characteristic of Jim Crow era segregation. Sadly, however, deeper forms of structural racism and racial inequality remain with us today. Many studies have concluded that racial inequality is a defining characteristic of Detroit and Southeast Michigan, marking Detroit as one of the most racially segregated and fractured Metropolitan Areas in the Country. Yet, others may deny that patterns of racial privilege and oppression still exist or that they bear any relationship to current realities.

Race and power are embedded in complex ways within social institutions. These institutions, through conscious and unconscious mechanisms, have worked to create, reinforce and perpetuate structures that may generate racial benefits and

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privileges for some, while systematically excluding others from basic opportunities for hope and advancement, denying them the fundamental promise of equality the Declaration of Independence affords all members of our society.

All too often, the role of the structures and institutions generating these patterns of privilege and oppression are ignored and left unexamined. As many have learned, it often takes a crisis like Hurricane Katrina to make visible the neglected sources of racism and inequality and the affect that these injustices have on people forced to live on the margins of America's promise.

Unfortunately, popular attention and understanding often fade when these crises are over. Then the quiet machinery of the social structures that may be generating racial privilege and oppression continue to operate, leaving the institutional causes of racism and inequality ignored once again by persons of privilege, until the next crisis emerges, a crisis that too will be forgotten when the fury subsides.

While attention fades, the structural realities of racial injustice remain and are reproduced over time. The black family discriminated against and denied the opportunity to buy a house in the 1950s was not only denied a home, but was denied the principal means of accumulating wealth in this society. The white family in the 1950s, given the opportunity to buy a home, was also afforded a means of accumulating and transferring wealth and opportunity from one generation to the next.

The data linking race, geography and patterns of persistent economic inequality are striking and undeniable. Whites live separately from blacks, and benefit from increased job opportunities, higher wages and many other opportunities not as readily available to blacks and other people of color. The city of Detroit and the inner-ring suburbs suffer disproportionately high levels of unemployment and poverty. Access to quality education, health care and institutions for self-advancement are substantially more limited. Life expectancies for African Americans in Detroit are substantially lower, infant and maternal mortality rates are substantially higher and incidences of chronic illnesses are substantially more pronounced than elsewhere in the State.

The indignities and frustrations of racial injustice are experienced every single day by members of the African American community and other people of color. The denial of hope and opportunity festers, like a dream deferred, creating pain, anger and despair. It can and has undermined the very fabric of our communities. It can and has led to crises like the Rebellions of 1943 and 1967. It can and has led to righteous action to build a more just and equal society. It can and should lead to a search for genuine truth and reconciliation.

Creating a racially just society is a gradual process that begins with an honest search for truth about our past and how that past may be affecting current realities. The Civil Rights Movement made great strides in helping this country deliver, in a more

inclusive way, on its promise of equality and opportunity. The Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa and Greensboro, North Carolina have proven effective mechanisms to examine and help reconcile past injustices. A Truth and Reconciliation process in Metropolitan Detroit can be an effective means to address the structural causes of racism and inequality that hold us all back and prevent the region from meeting its full potential.

Detroit has been an industrial and cultural leader throughout its three hundred year history. We are proud of our past and confident in our future. The same city that provided a Five Dollar Day, forged the Arsenal of Democracy and produced the voices of Motown is capable of rising to the challenge now. By honestly and constructively facing our past we can come to terms with the structural forces driving inequality that are holding us back. Detroit can once again become a national leader, defining its own future on just and equal terms.

The Housing Project Partnership of the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion (the AProject@), including the signers of its Declaration, invites major institutions, organizations and residents of Metropolitan Detroit to participate in a truth and reconciliation process to examine the context, causes and consequences of structural and institutional racism in the region. By understanding and coming to terms with the forces generating the patterns of racial privilege and oppression that hold us all back, we can create a more just, equal and prosperous future for all.

*We affirm that the intention of this examination shall be:*

- a) To discover and disseminate a truthful history of structural and institutional racism and its consequences in creating and perpetuating racial privilege and oppression in Detroit and Southeast Michigan;
- b) To invite institutions to address their own individual histories of conscious or unconscious perpetuation of patterns of racial privilege and oppression;
- c) To invite individual residents to participate in the truth and reconciliation process by standing witness to their experiences of racial privilege and oppression;
- d) To suggest ways to possibly reconcile and heal the pain, division and lost opportunities created by the long history of racial inequality in metropolitan Detroit; and
- e) To provide Detroit and Southeast Michigan with a set of findings and concrete recommendations as steps toward reconciliation to build a more just, equitable, inclusive and prosperous future.

*It is in this spirit that we affirm the message of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission: "Without Truth, no Healing; without Forgiveness, no Future."*

*Therefore, toward these ends,*

1. The Housing Project Partnership of the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion (Athe Project@) hereby establishes the Metropolitan Detroit Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Racial Inequality, charged with examining the causes, context and consequences of structural and institutional racism in creating patterns of privilege and oppression in Detroit and Southeast Michigan.
2. This examination is not for the purpose of exacting blame, revenge or recrimination. Rather, the Commission will attempt to learn how persons, groups and institutions came to be directly or indirectly responsible for perpetuating patterns of racial privilege and oppression. It will assess the impact of structural racism on the life and development of the community. It will seek possibilities for healing transformation.
3. The Commission's work will seek to make visible and transparent the too often neglected and ignored sources of racism and inequality. In carrying out this Charter the Commission will build upon and extend contemporary understandings of structural racism. Structural racism has been defined by the Kirwan Institute as an exploration of how "historic legacies, individuals and institutions work interactively to distribute material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages along racial lines." In conducting its analysis the Commission shall also look for guidance, as appropriate, to the methodologies and directives of the International Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination. See U.N. General Assembly, International Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, 21 December 1965, United Nations, Treaty Series, Vol. 660, pg. 195.
4. The Commission will thoughtfully and honestly examine the historical truths concerning race in Detroit and Southeast Michigan and will make recommendations, develop plans and facilitate actions designed to bring about racial equality and reconciliation.
5. The Commission will explore how locally based structures and institutions have embodied, reinforced and reproduced patterns of racial privilege and oppression. The Commission will pay particular attention to how these forces have played out in areas such as education, employment, health care, labor, housing, religious and faith-based organizations, transportation, financial institutions, local governments, police, criminal justice and correctional institutions.

6. The Commission will carry out this Charter by reviewing documents, inviting people and institutions to come forward with information, encouraging relevant institutions within each sector to examine their own institutional histories, consulting with experts and by any other means they consider appropriate.
7. Individuals will be an important part of the process. The Commission will solicit oral histories and take personal testimonies from individuals from all segments of the community, listening to how historical and current patterns of racial privilege and oppression have affected their lives.
8. The Commission will consist of nine (9) Commissioners who shall be persons of recognized integrity and principle, with a demonstrated commitment to the values of truth, reconciliation, equality and justice. The majority of the commissioners will be residents of Detroit and Southeast Michigan; at least two commissioners will be from outside the Detroit Metropolitan Area. Efforts will be made to maintain a balance of representation from Wayne, Macomb and Oakland Counties. Commissioners will serve on an honorary basis and in their personal capacity, but may be reimbursed for expenses incurred in the discharge of their responsibilities. The Commission will designate its own chair(s).
9. To insure the independence of the Commission:
  - a. All commissioners will be selected in accordance with AThe Selection Process for the Metropolitan Detroit Truth & Reconciliation Commission On Racial Inequality@ document, which is attached.
  - b. The final reports will be produced exclusively by the Commission and its staff.
  - c. Neither the Project nor any other group shall have privileged access to the reports before they are finalized.
10. The importance of an independent and autonomous Commission shall be balanced with the necessity of receiving continued, appropriate support from the Project. The Project shall continue to support the Commission by helping:
  - a. To encourage people and institutions to come forward and be engaged in the process
  - b. To facilitate initial relationships with the media and engage in an ongoing public education campaign.
  - c. To reach out to funders and sponsors.
  - d. To provide administrative support during its initial planning and set-up phase.
11. The Commission will convene a first meeting, as determined by the Commissioners, no later than sixty (60) days from the date on which the Selection Panel confirms and announces the selection and acceptance of its

members. From its first meeting, the Commission shall have a period of at least one year but not to exceed two years to fulfill the terms of the Charter. Within the first three months of the initial meeting, the Commission shall have addressed initial planning, determined its internal procedures and selection and appointed its key staff, created a plan for media and public outreach and issued a statement of principles.

12. The Commission shall issue reports to the residents of Detroit and Southeast Michigan in keeping with the intentions and spirit of the Charter. The Commission will ensure that its findings are factual, based on the information compiled and reviewed, and adequately documented in its report. The Commission may take steps to protect the identity of individual sources, if requested and appropriate. The Commission will also make specific, constructive recommendations to the City, to the residents of Southeast Michigan, and to other entities, as it deems appropriate to further the intentions set forth in the Charter.
13. At the completion of its work, all documents of the Commission, its notes, findings, exhibits and other collected materials, shall be permanently archived in Metropolitan Detroit in an institution whose purpose and tradition is in keeping with the objectives and spirit of the Commission Charter. The identity of this institution and the structure of the archive will be determined by the Commission and the Project.

***Truth and Reconciliation will begin when individuals and institutions come together in a spirit of honest reflection to promote racial justice and equality. The passage of time alone cannot cure these ills. There can only be genuine healing for the residents of Detroit and Southeast Michigan when the truth surrounding the structural causes and consequences of racial privilege and oppression are honestly confronted and understood, the suffering caused by such inequality fully acknowledged and forgiveness and reconciliation facilitated.***