

Related articles:

**Living out
our commitment**
(page 14)

Living Lutheran,
May 2017

Contact us:

LivingLutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the
magazine of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America.



Study guide

Living out our commitment

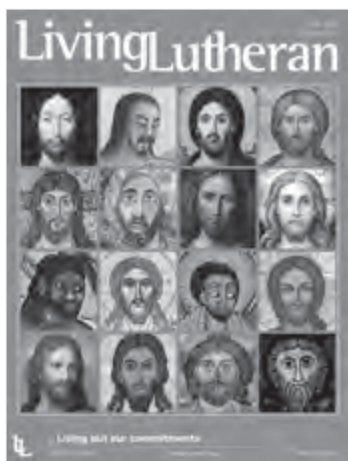
By Robert C. Blezard

The ELCA's 1993 social statement "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture" reminds us that when it was formed in 1988, the denomination established a goal to grow its membership to 10 percent people of color or language other than English. Now, 24 years after that social statement and 29 years after the ELCA's formation, we have not budged the needle. Our membership is 96 percent white. Why is this so? Certainly we can do better.

Exercise 1: One in Christ

Paul repeatedly tells us that Christians are different from other people because of our faith. It's not simply that we have a different story and a unique history, but how God works in us. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 3:26-28. It may be helpful to also look at the Rite of Holy Baptism (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 227; Lutheran Book of Worship, page 121). Discuss:

- Individually or as a group, make a list of the "labels" that you commonly use to describe yourself. How do these characteristics of your identity shape where you live, how you choose your friends, what you do for fun, how you think?
- What does it mean to be "in Christ"? How do you know whether you are "in Christ"? If we are baptized "into Christ," does that mean we are "in Christ"? What does it mean to "clothe yourselves with Christ"?
- Why is there a "new creation" when we are "in Christ"? How does this happen? What things "pass away," and why? What is the connection between our baptism and new life?
- What do the characteristics that Paul mentions in the Galatians passage (male, female, free, slave, Greek and Jew) have in common? How do they relate to the list of characteristics you made at the beginning of this exercise? Why and how does faith in Christ render them obsolete?
- As children of God in Christ, how are we ideally supposed to understand those who are different from us? Why? Why do we still too often emphasize the differences between us? How can we do better?



Reprints:

Permission is granted for individuals, small groups and congregations to reproduce this study guide for local use.

Contact us:

LivingLutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



Study guide: **Living out our commitment**

continued

Exercise 2: Diversity in the ELCA

In 2015, the U.S. Census Bureau reports, white non-Latino Americans comprised 61 percent of our population; African-Americans, 13 percent; Latino Americans, 17 percent; Asian Americans, 5 percent; and Native American, Native Alaskan or Native Hawaiian, 1.4 percent. Yet statistically, ELCA congregations have persistently remained at about 95 percent.

- What explains that disparity?
- How much of it is a problem in our wider culture? How much is it a problem with our church?
- Has our culture tried hard enough to create diversity and harmony among people of different groups? Has the ELCA tried hard enough to diversify its membership? What else could we do?

Exercise 3: Your diversity

What do you *think* is the racial diversity of your county or town when it comes to percentages of non-Latino whites, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians and American Natives? Write the number down, and then find out the actual data from the U.S. Census Bureau by going to census.gov/quickfacts and entering your municipality and county.

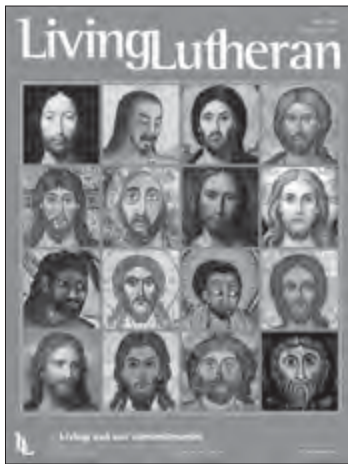
- What are the differences between your perceptions and the reality? What do you find surprising or interesting about the statistics? Why?
- Now compare the diversity of your area with your congregation's membership. What are the differences between them? What do you find interesting or surprising, and why?
- If your congregation's demographics are out of sync with that of your area, how do you explain the difference? Is it a problem mostly with the culture or with the church? What is the church's role in confronting and changing harmful elements within its own and its surrounding cultures?
- How can you do better? Why should you?

Exercise 4: Race relations

The ELCA was founded in 1988, some 24 years after landmark civil rights legislation officially outlawed discrimination, and 20 years before America saw the election of the first African-American president.

- Have race relations improved in our country? Explain. What do you see? What remains to be done?

Consider the highly publicized deaths of African-American males in encounters with the police, such as Eric Garner in New York; Freddy



Tell us:

Do you find this guide helpful? Send comments and suggestions to rcblezard@embarqmail.com

Contact us:

LivingLutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: **Living out our commitment**

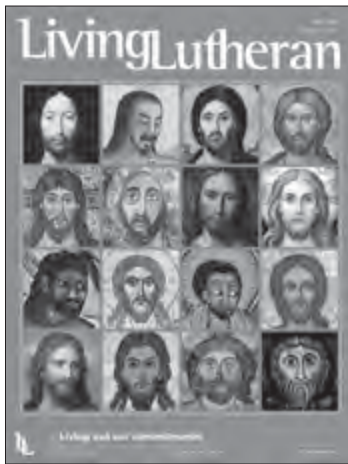
continued

Gray in Baltimore; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo.; Tamir Rice in Cleveland; and Walter Scott in Charleston, S.C.

- What do these incidents say about the state of race relations in our country? What do they say about institutional or systemic racism in our country?
- How can the church (and why should the church) support and accompany African-Americans who feel the criminal justice system is unfair to them? How can the church (and why should the church) support and accompany our local police departments whose officers feel unfairly characterized by these incidents? Why is it *not* mutually exclusive that the church support and accompany both African-Americans and local law enforcement officers?
- Have these incidents been explored or explained in your congregation? If not, why not? Does that silence reveal anything about the prevailing attitudes about race and justice in your congregation? What could your congregation do to help open a helpful discussion not only about the incidents but also about the larger issue of race, prejudice and justice in America? Why is it important that the church lead this discussion? Why is it critical that the church start this discussion?
- If these incidents were explored or explained in your congregation, how was it done? Did your congregation help foster a healthy examination of prevailing attitudes in our country about race, justice, prejudice and equality? Was it an adequate exploration? What could have been done better? Is it continuing? How might it continue?

On the morning of June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, a then-21-year-old white man who belonged with his family to an ELCA congregation, walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, S.C., and shot to death nine African-Americans. Roof had ties to white supremacist groups, and the murders were considered hate crimes. Convicted of the charges, he is serving life in prison without parole.

- What was the reaction of you and your congregation to learn that a young Lutheran had committed these racially charged murders? How did you and your congregation reflect on the murders? What kind of soul-searching did it spark?
- Has this incident been explored in your congregation? If not, why not? Does that silence reveal anything about the prevailing attitudes about race and justice in your congregation? What could your congregation do to help open a helpful discussion not only about this incident but also about the larger issue of race, prejudice and justice in America? Why is it important that the church lead this discussion? Why is it critical that the church start this discussion?



About the study guide author:



Rob Blezard

is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. He holds degrees

from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).

Contact us:

LivingLutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: **Living out our commitment**

continued

- If this incident was explored in your congregation, how was it done? Did your congregation help foster a healthy examination of prevailing attitudes in our country about race, justice, prejudice and equality? Was it an adequate exploration? What could have done better? Is it continuing? How might it continue?

For further study:

- Read the 1993 ELCA social statement “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture.” A free download is available at elca.org/socialstatements, as is a study guide. Explore the statement’s biblical and theological understandings, as well as its observations about culture and society. Now 24 years later, which of the statement’s suppositions and insights remain valid, and what might be updated?
- Study the 2013 ELCA social statement “The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries.” It points out that African-Americans and Latinos are disproportionately incarcerated compared to white Americans. (Though they comprised 12 percent of the total population in 2011, African-Americans accounted for 38 percent of those incarcerated in state and federal prisons. Similarly, Latinos comprised 17 percent of the population but 23 percent of inmates. Non-Latino whites comprised 63 percent of the population but 34 percent of inmates.) The statement and a study guide are available for download at elca.org/socialstatements. The statement provides insight into the tension between law enforcement and communities of color.

LIVING OUT OUR COMMITMENT

How is the ELCA carrying out its vision of diversity?

By Karris Golden

In 30 years the nation's increased racial and ethnic diversity hasn't changed ELCA demographics, according to statistics.

Since the 1980s, the U.S. Census Bureau shows the total number of African-American, Latino/Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian American and biracial citizens as a group has more than doubled. While the most recent Pew Religious Landscape Study (2014) indicates several religious groups reflected this growth, the ELCA did not. That's despite targeted efforts to reflect that diversity.

It has been a long road, with work left to be done, said Judith Roberts, ELCA racial justice ministries program director. But she's hopeful, thanks in part to actions taken by the 2016 Churchwide Assembly in August. "The church is turning the corner in striving for justice," she said. "At the assembly, it felt like the church was speaking boldly. It's now up to each of us to carry out that vision. For the person in the pew, it comes down to encouraging us to ask,

'Why do we exist?' "





Several memorials and actions approved by the assembly addressed anti-racism and relationship-building initiatives. These included “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery,” “African Descent Lutherans’ Lives Matter” and “Deepening Relationships with Historic Black Churches.”

“We’re nine months out from when the Churchwide Assembly passed memorials that deal with racial and ethnic diversity,” Roberts said. “People hear about these things. They hear about the work that’s being done. They just don’t necessarily know of the direct link—that these actions come from Churchwide Assembly. We can try to make sure that people are making that connection.”

“Despite many advances by people of African Descent within the ELCA and society, racism and racial discrimination ... continue to manifest themselves in inequality and disadvantage.”

—African Descent Lutherans’ Lives Matter

SEEKING REAL RELATIONSHIPS

Assembly actions gave momentum to efforts to address racism, segregation and inequality directed at people of African descent, said Lamont Wells, director for evangelical mission for the Metropolitan New York Synod.

As president of the African Descent Lutheran Association (ADLA), Wells works to connect congregations to the “African Descent Lutherans’ Lives Matter” and “Deepening Relationships with Historic Black Churches” memorials. These documents are to aid in exposing and healing old wounds.

“I love the church. I love being Lutheran,” Wells said. “But I am being dishonest with myself if I don’t tell the church these things that are keeping it from being all that it can be.”

Wells is involved in efforts to ensure that the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church will become the ELCA’s first historically black church full communion partner.

“If that is to be so, I want it to be a real relationship, not just something to talk about,” he said. “We share the common histories of how the United States’ mainline churches excluded people of color, especially blacks. This relationship is an opportunity for the ELCA to acknowledge its part in that history and begin a process of healing.”



“WHEREAS, our Lord Jesus Christ prayed for the unity of the people of God, that they may become completely one”

*—Deepening Relationships with
Historic Black Churches*

To that end, Wells advises ELCA congregations to seek relationships and partnerships with neighboring AMEZ congregations or other historic black churches.

Emphasis of assembly actions could help more people see African-American Lutheran pastors are trained to serve *any* congregation. “Too many of our synods have not had a single black pastor serving in a white congregation,” he said. “We need to shift our thinking, and that will require retraining our church call committees to look at the person, not the race.”

This is seen as an ongoing challenge in the ELCA, with a membership that is 96 percent white. The Pew study lists the denomination among the nation’s least diverse religious groups.

18►

A bishop’s perspective

“Our synod is unusually diverse already. ... At last year’s [Southwest California] Synod Assembly, 22 percent of the voting members were people of color or first language other than English. We’re proud of that, but we still don’t come near to the diversity levels of the city in which we are embedded.

“A few of our congregations have done very well through the generations in absorbing new people in the neighborhoods around them; others continue to struggle with that. We need trust and faith and courage to invite people different from us to be part of our congregations, and openness to the new things they will bring.

“There are more Uber drivers in Los Angeles than there are ELCA Lutherans in our whole five-county synod; we represent a small stream within a great sea of people. But we Lutherans represent a powerful religious message and a culture of devotion and service that has survived for half a millennium and spans the globe. ... We just have to proclaim the gospel more forcefully and serve our neighbors more courageously.”

—Guy Erwin, bishop of the Southwest California Synod

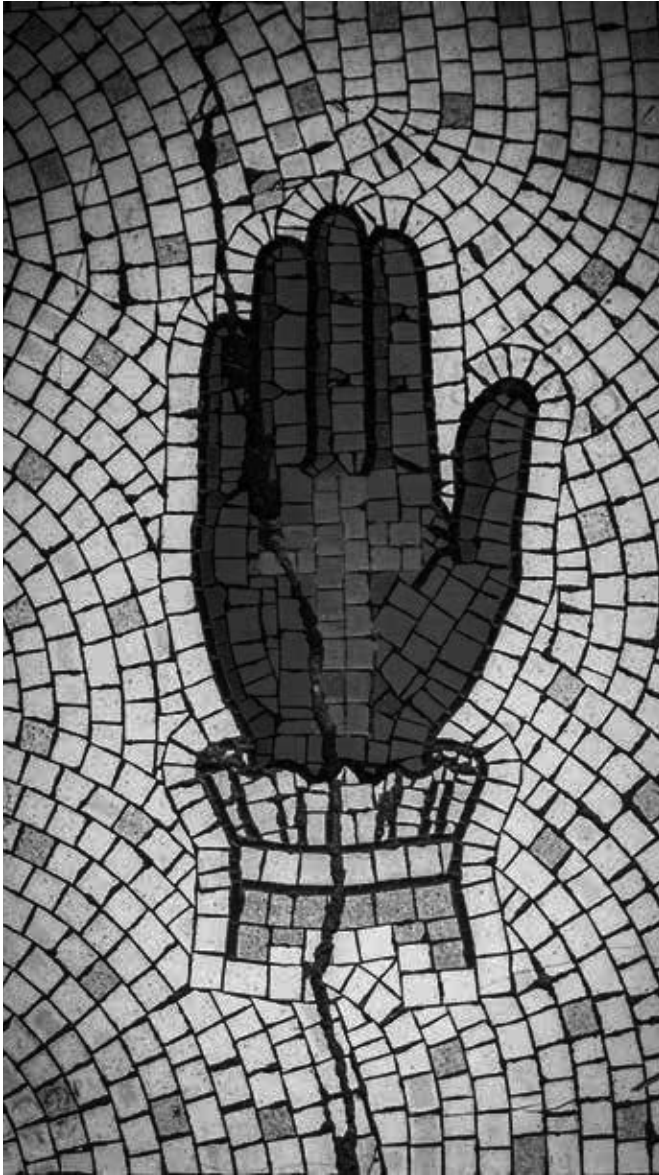
“Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery”

During the 2016 Churchwide Assembly, voting members approved a variety of memorials from the ELCA’s 65 synods. Several touched on the church’s response to societal issues of race, ethnicity and culture, including the “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery.”

The doctrine of discovery drove centuries of European exploration and colonialism from the mid-15th century on. The belief in Christian superiority and power was used to legitimize claims on lands inhabited by indigenous peoples, including ancestors of ELCA members of American Indian and Alaska Native heritage.

The 2016 Churchwide Assembly overwhelmingly approved memorials from 20 synods and affirmed “that this church will eliminate the doctrine of discovery from its contemporary rhetoric and programs, electing to practice accompaniment with native peoples instead of a missionary endeavor to them, allowing these partnerships to mutually enrich indigenous communities and the ministries of the ELCA.”

To follow ongoing initiatives, follow the ELCA American Indian/Alaska Native Lutheran Association on Facebook (@ELCANATIVE).



THE “R-WORD”

Since its beginning, the ELCA has struggled to become a church reflective of the nation’s demographics, said Inez Torres Davis, Women of the ELCA’s director for justice.

Talks that led the three predecessor bodies—the American Lutheran Church, Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and Lutheran Church in America—to merge were marked by a desire to one day increase the number of members of color, she said. This required exploring the presence and nature of racism, she added. So in 1991 the ELCA held its first conference on racism and justice in the church.

“There is a lot of sensitivity around the ‘r-word,’ ” Davis said. “People tend to think racism is a specific kind of behavior. We’re not looking for the racist in the room; we’re looking for systemic and institutional racism.”

In 1993 the ELCA approved the social statement “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture.” It said: “People will come from the east and west, north and south to eat in the reign of God (Luke 13:29). . . . [D]iversity of cultures is both a given and a glimpse of the future” (elca.org/socialstatements).


The 1993 statement included a goal to draw 10 percent of ELCA members from “African-American, Asian, Hispanic or Native American” communities by 2003. The target seemed ambitious for a church with a membership hovering near 98 percent white. While the ELCA implemented numerous actions to achieve it, increased diversity remained frustratingly elusive.

EMPOWERED CONGREGATIONS

Church leaders have since shifted to diversity goals that encourage congregations to reflect their communities, Roberts said. This involves strategies to identify opportunities in the surrounding community.

Discussion within congregations can reveal new ministries, she said. Questions about justice and inclusion of underrepresented groups can help congregations see new opportunities.

This, in turn, fosters dialogue. Roberts suggests hosting congregational forums and asking such questions as: “How can we focus on who we are as a church and a nation in a time of divisiveness? There aren’t American Indian tribes in our area, but are there groups for indigenous communities we can reach out to? What would it look like if we begin a dialogue with a historic black church? How can our faith and theology heal brokenness? What’s getting in the way?”

Roberts believes ELCA members are ready for such talks: “Congregations are already responding to the memorials from churchwide—taking and using them to engage their congregations and communities. The assembly put the church on a better footing to respond and ... have congregations feel empowered.” 

ADLA to gather in July

The African Descent Lutheran Association biennial gathering will take place July 22-25 in Philadelphia. The event is a joint assembly with the Union of Black Episcopalians.

The event will focus on a Reformation commemoration through the lens of the “African Descent Lutherans’ Lives Matter” and “Deepening Relationships with Historic Black Churches” memorials.

For details, follow the organization on Facebook (@ADLAELCA) or visit ADLAELCA.org/biennial-assembly.

Racial justice resources

- **“One Body, Many Members”:** ELCA Racial Justice Ministries has reissued this congregational resource, a faith-based study of race, culture and class. Search for “One Body Many Members” at elca.org.
- **Ethnic Specific and Multicultural Ministries:** The ELCA offers mission strategies and other tools related to African Descent, American Indian and Alaska Native, Arab and Middle Eastern, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Latino ministries. There also are resources on anti-racism advocacy and dismantling racism, white privilege and power.

“Talking Together as Christians Cross-culturally: A Field Guide” and “Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues” are both available in English and Spanish. Search for “Ethnic Specific and Multicultural Ministries” at elca.org.
- **Today’s Dream; Tomorrow’s Reality:** Women of the ELCA coordinates anti-racism education trainers through the network Today’s Dream, Tomorrow’s Reality, which has representatives in most synods. For more information, contact your synodical women’s organization or Women of the ELCA.

The organization also provides free, downloadable materials at welca.org (search for “racial justice advocacy”). These include a racial justice bibliography, studies and the free discussion guide “How to have helpful conversations about race in the church.” A five-part anti-racism Bible study is available at welca.org/resources.

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at livinglutheran.org.



Karris Golden is a professional writer-editor and a member of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She writes a weekly faith and values column for *The Courier*.