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(page 38)

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Study guide

From vision to reality

How has the ELCA made progress on diversity since its 2016 commitments?

By Robert C. Blezard

Despite 30 years of talk and effort to achieve a membership goal of 10% people of color or whose primary language was not English, the ELCA has not really budged the needle when it comes to diversity. Both nationally and with most of our congregations, our membership doesn't reflect the wider culture. What gives?

Exercise 1: We are one

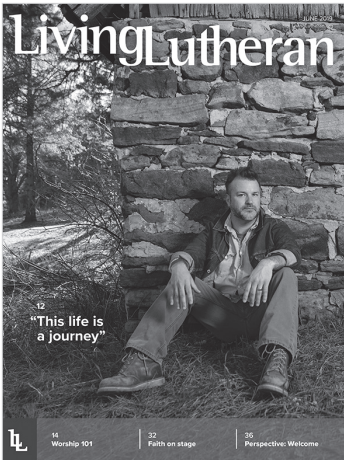
Writing to Christians in Galatia, Paul expressed our underlying unity: "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28).

- What does this passage mean to you? What is its central message?
- Do you believe that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ? Does your congregation?
- How well is that belief lived out in your daily life? Explain. How could you do better?
- How is this belief lived out in the life of your congregation? How could you all do better?
- How is this belief lived out in the life of the ELCA? How can we do better?

Exercise 2: "Failure" to diversify

At its founding in 1988, the ELCA set a 10-year goal to grow its membership to be 10% people of color or whose primary language was not English. Now 30 years out, we are nearly as white as we were at the beginning. "Let's be honest," said ELCA Secretary Chris Boerger, "Let's start calling it a failure."

- Do you agree with Boerger's assessment? Why or why not?
- Is failure a hard word to ascribe to a church you love? Why or why not?
- What word would you prefer?
- Why do you think the ELCA as a whole has failed to achieve diversity?



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Study guide: **From vision to reality** *continued*

- Although the factors are complex, to what degree is it a failure of trying? To what degree a failure of programs and education? To what degree a failure of will?
- Has your own congregation fared any better in its efforts?

Exercise 3: Left out

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus leaves his disciples with the "Great Commission" to go and make disciples of all nations.

- What does the Great Commission mean in the context of a diverse world, where God's people can be found possessing a variety of skin tones and facial features, speaking a variety of languages, and following a variety of customs and attitudes?
- What does this mean in the context of a diverse nation, where God's people can be found possessing a variety of skin tones and facial features, speaking a variety of languages, and following a variety of customs and attitudes?
- If the ELCA has stubbornly remained 96% white in a nation that is only 66% white, can we say honestly that we are fulfilling Jesus' commission to make disciples of all nations? Explain.
- Who is "left out" of the ELCA? Who is "left out" of your congregation? What can we do about this?

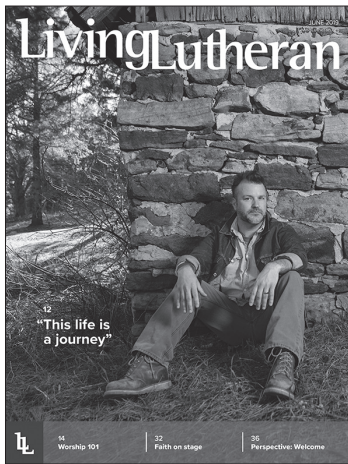
Exercise 4: Love your neighbor

Identifying the most important commandments, Jesus taught that loving our neighbor as ourselves is second in importance only to loving God with all our being (Mark 12:29-31).

- What does it mean to love our neighbor as ourselves? How is this lived out in your daily life? In your congregation's life?
- Who are the neighbors we are commanded to love?
- Are our neighbors only the people who have the same skin color as us? Who only speak the same language? Whose ancestors came only from the same region of the world? Explain.
- Our church's membership is 96% white. What does that reveal about how well we love our neighbor? Explain.
- How diversified is your congregation in relation to the surrounding community? What does that say about how well you love your neighbor?
- What does our church need to learn? What does our church need to do?

Exercise 5: 'The most segregated hour'

Lamenting the lack of diversity in American churches, Martin Luther King



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Study guide: **From vision to reality** *continued*

Jr. commented on NBC's *Meet the Press* (April 17, 1960) that 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning was "one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour, in Christian America."

- What thoughts come to mind as you ponder King's words?
- What was true about King's words then? What is still true today?
- Thinking of race relations in our country today, in what ways have things gotten better? What specific evidence can you cite?
- How have things gotten worse? What specific evidence can you cite?
- When it comes to church diversity, why haven't we gotten further along?
- What would King say today?

Exercise 6: Whitest church

With 96% of our membership of European descent, the ELCA earned the dubious honor of being the whitest church among religious groups studied in the Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study. By comparison, whites comprise 66% of U.S. adults.

- What do you think of the finding?
- Which words best capture your reaction: Shock, surprise, bewilderment, embarrassment, shame, anger, apathy, any others?
- How does the ranking compare to your congregation's makeup?
- What reasons can you think of for this fact?

Exercise 7: Other religious groups

How does the ELCA's ranking compare with the 29 other groups in the Pew study? Below are 10 other groups in the study. Make copies of the list and ask members of your study group to rank them according to how white they are. The ELCA is No. 1 as the whitest church. Which do you think are No. 2, 3, 4, etc. (Results are at the end of the study guide.)

No. 1 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (96%)

_____ Southern Baptist Convention

_____ United Church of Christ

_____ The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod

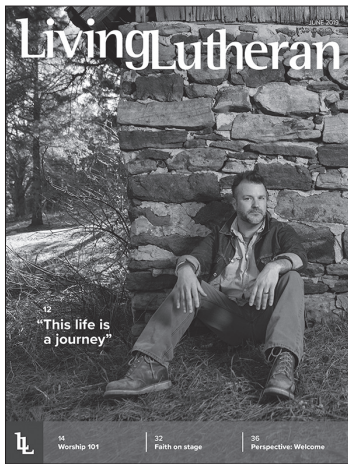
_____ Assemblies of God

_____ The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

_____ United Methodist Church

_____ Jehovah's Witnesses

_____ American Baptist Churches



Study guide: **From vision to reality** *continued*

_____ The Catholic Church

_____ The Episcopal Church

When everyone has finished, compare the group's responses with the "Diversity ranking results" at the end of the study guide. Discuss:

- Overall, how did your study group do?
- What reasoning did you use in deciding your choices?
- What result surprised you the most? The least?
- Which group was *more* diverse than you had expected? Why?
- Which group was *less* diverse than you had expected? Why?
- What is your most important takeaway conclusion?

Exercise 8: Your congregation

With white people accounting for 66% of the U.S. population but 96% of ELCA membership, we certainly have a lot of work to do. How is your congregation faring?

- In what ways has diversity arisen as an issue in your congregation over the years?
- How has your congregation worked to reach out to a diversity of people?
- What efforts has your congregation made to help members understand the complexity of racism?
- How is racism different from racial justice? Can we not exhibit overt racism but still need to work on issues of racial justice and full inclusion?
- What percentage of your congregation's membership is white? Nonwhite?
- How do those percentages compare with the diversity of your immediate neighborhood? (U.S. Census data may help with the following categories.) Your municipality? Your county? Your state?
- What does the data reveal? How much work does your congregation have to do?

Exercise 9: Our diverse lives

It's often been said that we are most comfortable with people who are just like us. To what degree does our congregational and church homogeneity reflect the choices we make in our lives? For a few minutes, ask members to silently ponder whether and how much these statements ring true for them:

- I am comfortable with people who are different from me.
- I often seek out people whose backgrounds, race and nationality are different from mine.

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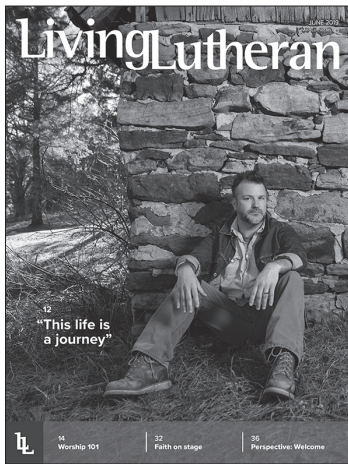
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Study guide: **From vision to reality** *continued*

- My community is ethnically, economically and socially diverse.
- My children attend/attended schools that are/were racially and socially diverse.
- I have neighbors who are of a different ethnicity or whose first language is not English.
- I interact with co-workers of different ethnicities or whose first language is not English.
- I count as a friend (not just acquaintance) at least one person who is from a different ethnicity or whose first language is not English.

Then discuss as a group:

- What did you learn?
- Anybody want to share?
- To what degree do we unwittingly self-select experiences and people who are in our comfort zone?
- How might this phenomenon be reflected in our church diversity?
- How can you/we do better?

Exercise 10: Is diversity enough?

- While a worthy goal, is diversity in our congregations sufficient? How might diversity be a first step toward inclusion, racial justice and reconciliation?
- What is the difference between diversity and full inclusion in God's beloved community?
- What would it look like to not merely diversify our membership but to ensure the full participation, complete appreciation, and celebration of the gifts and experiences of everyone in our community?
- What would it add to your congregation's life? How would it enrich you?

For action:

- The ELCA has great resources for further study on racial justice and reconciliation. Find them at elca.org/resources/racial-justice. How might you help your congregation to understand and respond? What might a congregational task force or team look like? How could you help form one at your church?
- As a study group, draft an action plan to study and work on diversity and racial justice and reconciliation in your congregation. Present it to your pastor and congregation council for implementation.
- The 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly suggested that synods provide racial justice resources and training for leaders. How has your synod

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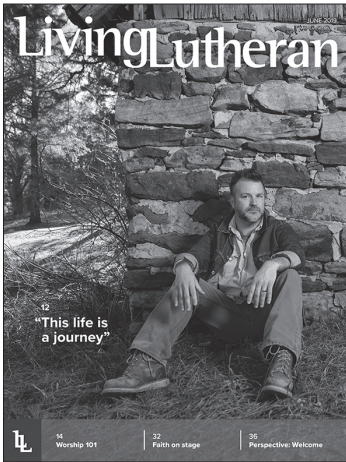
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Study guide: **Dignity & grace** *continued*

responded? What resources are available? Has your synod formed a racial justice team? How might you or your congregation participate?

Diversity ranking results:

Here is how nine other Christian denominations were ranked in the Pew study. For complete results go to an internet search engine and type "ELCA whitest church Pew study."

- No. 1 ELCA, 96% white;
- No. 2 Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, 95% white;
- No. 3 United Methodist Church, 94% white;
- No. 4 The Episcopal Church, 90% white;
- No. 5 United Church of Christ, 89% white;
- No. 6 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 88% white;
- No. 7 Southern Baptist Convention, 85% white;
- No. 8 American Baptist Churches, 73% white;
- No. 9 Assemblies of God, 66% white;
- No. 10 Catholic Church, 59% white;
- No. 11 Jehovah's Witnesses, 36% white.

From vision to reality

How has the ELCA made progress on diversity since its 2016 commitments?

By John Potter

In 2016, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly made an unprecedented commitment to becoming a more authentically diverse church. Over the last three years, congregations, synods and the churchwide organization have been working together on measurable diversity objectives.

At its constituting convention in 1988, the ELCA adopted the goal “that within 10 years of its establishment its membership shall include at least 10% people of color and/or primary language other than English.” When the ELCA didn’t reach that goal, the 2000 Churchwide Assembly added a continuing resolution to the constitution, defining “person of color” and “primary language other than English.”

By 2013, when Chris Boerger began his term as ELCA secretary, the church was still far from achieving its original goal. “It suddenly occurred to me, ‘We’re now 30 years in the life of this church. We just need to say we failed at our first goal of being a church of 10 percent. Can we be honest? Let’s start calling it a failure, let’s not call that a work in progress,’” he said.

Not long after, an analysis of the Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study ranked the ELCA last among 30 selected religious groups in denominational representation of people of color.

Feeling a new approach was needed to make progress on the ELCA’s commitment to ethnic and racial diversity, Boerger and others began discussing a different framework for goals and reporting. “I had started hearing people talking about it as ‘When we get to 10%, we’ve done it,’” Boerger said. “Rather than seeing the 10% as a floor that we would build onto, it was seen as a ceiling that would stop our work. So looking for language other than a percentage seemed important.”

Boerger felt it was necessary to look at the geographic areas of the synods and congregations. “We made a commitment to look ethnically like our neighborhoods, or the demographics of the territory in which we exist. Quite frankly, that’s much higher than 10%,” he said.

In a report to the 2016 Churchwide Assembly, Boerger advocated for amendments to continuing resolutions addressing the diversity goal. The resolutions—approved by the assembly—called for each of the church’s expressions to annually assess its ethnic and racial diversity “when compared to the demographic data of its community or territory.” The churchwide organization was to work with synods as they assisted congregations in achieving those goals.

“There was an attempt to build some accountability into the continuing resolutions,” Boerger said. The actions required annual reports to the Church Council and reports every three years to the Churchwide Assembly. “In the past, there was no requirement for reporting,” he added.

Candid conversations

As ELCA program director for racial justice ministries, Judith Roberts receives the annual synod reports on progress toward congregational diversity

ELCA Secretary Chris Boerger advocated for amendments to continuing resolutions addressing the church’s diversity goal at the 2016 Churchwide Assembly.

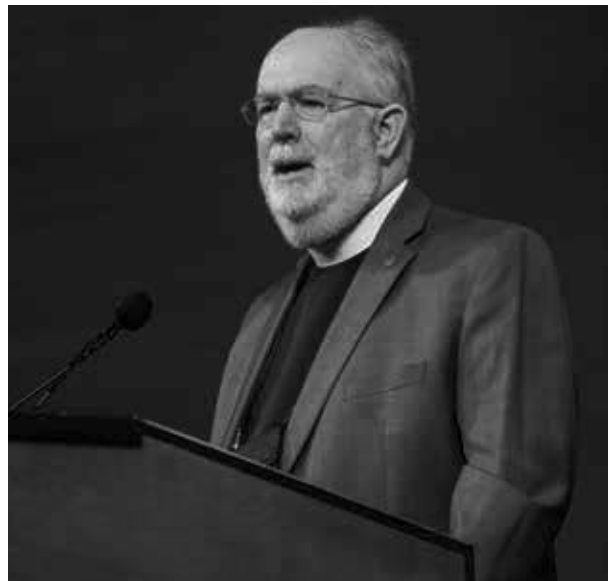


Photo: Jeff Millies

goals. In the last three years, racial justice ministries have assisted synods with training and development.

Roberts pointed to another continuing resolution on racial justice adopted at the 2016 Churchwide Assembly that encouraged synods to train rostered ministers every two years in anti-racism work. Although not required, several synods have since made that training mandatory.

“We made a commitment to look ethnically like our neighborhoods, or the demographics of the territory in which we exist.”

She described a “multipronged approach” of churchwide units collaborating in achieving goals across the church: “There are intentional spaces with the Conference of Bishops and the Office of the Presiding Bishop, racial justice ministries, and Research and Evaluation [for working together on the goals]. The congregational vitality team is tracking how they’re supporting leadership development, how they are walking with synods on area strategies, and partnering congregations up to learn from each other and support each other.”

Part of Roberts’ work with the conference has been in “candid conversations” about helping the bishops identify the level at which their synods currently reflect the diversity of their areas. “The bishops have been very engaged in this reporting,” she said. “Some synods are just beginning their

journey; some synods are already doing the work and they need more tools; and some synods are showing results. We have at least three different groups of where synods would place themselves.”

Moving forward, Roberts is working with the other churchwide units and the conference to implement a reporting tool that will streamline the collecting, tracking and sharing of information, beyond reviewing parochial reports.

The 2016 resolutions also directed the ELCA Church Council to form a task force for strategic authentic diversity. The group was tasked with developing a comprehensive set of strategies for equipping congregations and synods in the work of becoming a more authentically diverse church.

When the task force met, they recognized their common experiences, as individuals and as members of communities, within the church. “That allowed for offering of some collective perspective from among people of color that, quite frankly, doesn’t happen in that way often enough in the life of our church,” said Albert Starr, co-convenor of the task force and ELCA director for ethnic specific and multicultural ministries.

Abraham Allende, task force co-convenor and bishop of the Northeastern Ohio Synod, agreed: “There were 16 of us; everyone represented some heretofore marginalized community, whether it be Native American, Asian American, the LGBTQ community and so forth. For me, it was really gratifying to see that. These were not just people

The 2016 Churchwide Assembly directed the ELCA Church Council to form a task force for strategic authentic diversity (below).



Photo: Gigie Sijera-Grant



Photo: Gajle Sjoren-Grant

The task force for strategic authentic diversity, pictured here at the Lutheran Center, submitted a report and recommendations to the Church Council, which recommended them to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly.

who were selected because of the community they represented, they brought gifts to the table—the different perspectives, and then, of course, the theological and the academic background to it.

“And we did some hard work. We did not want the results of our work to just sit on the shelf somewhere, and that was really a motivating force for us.”

Called to be transformational

In April, the task force’s report and recommendations were adopted by the Church Council, which recommended them to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. The report included five strategies for becoming a more authentically diverse church: theological framing and equipping; theological education and leadership development; healing action; structural accountability in all expressions of the ELCA; and partnership in this work with full communion, ecumenical and interreligious partners.

“One of the things that [the strategies] have in common is around promoting what we have been collectively referring to as a ‘metanoia movement’—

“As we do our work of moving from vision to reality ... that work has to be foundational enough to be intentionally woven into every aspect of the life of our church.”

calling for a change of heart and mind that will help our church in all of its expressions,” Starr said.

When asked by a Church Council member what authentic diversity would look like, Starr used the curriculum analogy of being moved from the status of “elective” to “required.”

“As we do our work of moving from vision to

reality ... that work has to be foundational enough to be intentionally woven into every aspect of the life of our church,” he said. That can only be accomplished if voices that have previously been marginalized are invested in as full participants in the life of the church, he added.

Congregations made up of predominantly European descent members “can ask the questions, ‘How can we, from our context, support this? What do we need to know about this? How do we journey together on this from where we are?’” Starr said.

Allende agreed: “For us, it’s not an option: every synod and every part of the church really needs to address this issue in their context. Because, obviously, every context or every synod is going to look different.”

What it looks like to address authentic diversity in a specific context, Allende said, ultimately comes down to one basic objective—developing relationships. “It’s easy to look at our political climate now and see the divisiveness that exists,” he said. “But the church is called to be different. The church is called to be transformational. And I think that, not only our rostered ministers but a lot of people in our congregations, are taking that responsibility seriously.”

Visit elca.org/resources/racial-justice for free downloadable resources, including “Troubling the Waters for Healing of the Church.” Download a study guide for this article at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



John Potter is a content editor of *Living Lutheran*.