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Study guide

The oldest ELCA church resides in the U.S. Virgin Islands

By Robert C. Blezard

The witness of seven historic Caribbean Synod Lutheran churches, several established more than a century before the United States was even a country, reveal a lot about the struggle for liberation amid white privilege, oppression, slavery and economic and social status. Their stories also point out the difficulty of any church to be prophetic, bold and true to the gospel while serving a culture whose values and practices clash with those of Our Lord. These are issues many North American churches also need to face.

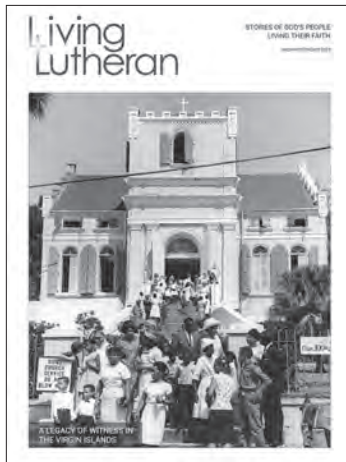
EXERCISE 1: GOING ALONG TO GET ALONG

The stories of the Lutheran congregations in the Virgin Islands reveal the degree to which churches were complicit in colonialism and oppression. Consider:

- The churches were often silent at best and supportive at worst while the island cultures practiced enslavement, oppression or exploitation of non-European peoples.
- Frederick Lutheran Church's parsonage contained a jail for enslaved Africans who rebuked slavery.
- The churches occupied a privileged position in island culture. For some, their buildings were constructed in locations prized for their security and proximity to trappings of wealth and trade.
- Clergy were held in high esteem and were intertwined with political governance. The pastor of Frederick on St. Thomas even served as acting governor when the official was not there.
- At worship, churches segregated European congregants from African descent worshipers, relegating the latter to the balcony.

For *each* of these facts, discuss:

- What does this say about the nature of the church? Its congregants?
- What might Jesus have said about each of these practices? How would the gospel have led the churches to make other decisions?
- What might have been a better choices for the churches, their leaders and their congregants to have made? Why?
- What factors might have led church leaders and congregants to accept the status quo?



Study guide: **Oldest ELCA church** *continued*

- To what degree does any congregation, its leaders and congregants, accept the culture's "status quo" when it comes to social issues, especially around poverty, racism and prejudice?
- If, hypothetically, a congregation, its leaders and congregants adopt gospel-based teachings and practices that conflict with the culture's deeply embedded norms, what consequences are likely to follow?
- If you were a congregant in one of those churches in the 17th or 18th century, what would you have thought and done? Why?

EXERCISE 2: COURAGE AND STRENGTH

After a number of slave rebellions and uprisings, Gov. Peter von Scholten declared emancipation from the steps of Lord God of Sabaoth Lutheran Church on St. Croix in 1848—15 years before Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The article points out that Lutheran churches had played a role in liberating people, but asks the \$64,000 question: "What was stopping the church from liberating people in the first place?" Discuss:

- How and to what degree are churches influenced by the practices, cultures, values and attitudes of the culture in which they live? Why is this a natural tendency that can be observed in all church-culture relationships throughout history?
- How are the essential messages of the gospel bound to come into conflict with those of the wider worldly culture? How and to what degree is our gospel countercultural to the world?
- How can a strong worldly culture create blind spots for churches and people of faith, where we can't readily see instances of injustice, immorality, wrongs and evil?
- How and why is it sometimes difficult for the church to confront, contradict or challenge the prevailing culture?
- To what degree do Christians tend to look at the gospel in light of their culture, rather than their culture in light of the gospel?
- How has this tendency evidenced itself in the United States in, for example, slavery, treatment of Native American peoples, criminal justice and incarceration, the civil rights movement, the drive for equality for women or the effort to recognize LGBTQIA+ rights?
- Does worldly culture always rejoice when churches, congregations, preachers or congregants stand up for what is right over and against prevailing social norms? Explain. (How did it work out for Jesus?)
- How does history tend to vindicate prophetic voices in the church that stand up for what is right? Can you think of examples?
- The churches of the Virgin Islands might have come late to the effort to liberate enslaved and oppressed people, but how important is it that they joined it at all?

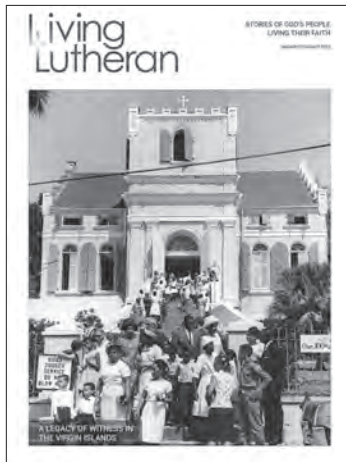
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Study guide: **Oldest ELCA church** *continued*

- What are the cultural blind spots for you and your congregation? Why are they so hard to see? And even if you see them, why are they so hard to work against?
- What can you and your congregation do?

EXERCISE 3: “WHITE FLIGHT”

Racism and prejudice may be discerned in the histories of many ELCA congregations whose traditional neighborhoods underwent dramatic demographic shifts in the 20th century. The Great Migration brought an estimated 6 million Southern African Americans to cities in the North and West. “White flight” was the response of millions of urban whites who moved out of the cities and into suburbs and exurbs.

Former First Lady Michelle Obama (born in 1964) has talked about how her childhood Chicago neighborhood of South Shore was devastated by “white flight,” turning from 96% white in 1950 to 96% Black by 1980. Hers was one of the Black families that moved in, only to see white families leave. “One by one they packed their bags and they ran from us,” she said (*City Journal*, August 2020). Obama said white flight left South Shore, as other communities, “in shambles.”

“White flight” represented disinvestment in urban communities, leaving impoverished neighborhoods that had once been prosperous and blighted areas that had once been stable. The legacy of “white flight” can be seen in both ELCA urban churches that once thrived but now are shuttered or struggling to engage new urban neighbors, as well as in suburban churches that were founded by white families who fled to the suburbs after World War II.

- What has been your understanding of “white flight” and its impact on urban communities?
- What is the logical impact on communities when, because of a “changing neighborhood,” established white families leave en masse, taking from the community their money, connections, businesses, institutions and children from the school system?
- Do you know of urban ELCA congregations that were prosperous right after World War II but are now struggling? To what degree was “white flight” a factor?
- Do you know of congregations that moved out of the city after World War II and are now thriving in the suburbs? To what degree was “white flight” to the suburbs a factor?
- What is your congregation’s history? In what ways has “white flight” been a factor in its history?
- What can be learned from this phenomenon? What can we do better?

EXERCISE 3: REDLINING

During the Great Migration (mentioned above), many African Americans were prevented from living where they desired by “redlining,” whereby lending institutions, real estate brokers and even government agencies followed policies that

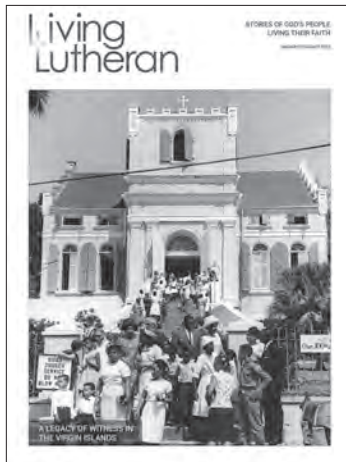
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barred nonwhites from many desirable neighborhoods. Redlining contributed to racial isolation and urban decay. Discuss:

- Why was the practice of redlining wrong? Unjust? Immoral? What would Jesus do?
- Redlining of the 20th century took place after slavery was abolished, but before the civil rights movement. What were the underlying attitudes and presumptions that contributed to redlining?
- How did redlining hinder an African American family's social advancement? How did it limit educational and economic opportunities?
- How did redlining serve to perpetuate cultural prejudices against African Americans and nonwhites? How did it hinder positive social interaction and understanding between whites and African Americans?
- What is the history of redlining in your community? Your state? What are the lingering aftereffects of redlining?
- How would your congregation respond to redlining?

EXERCISE 4: CIVIL RIGHTS

Though Martin Luther King Jr. is today widely revered as a prophet, a religious hero and martyr, he wasn't universally admired during the civil rights heyday of the 1950s and 1960s. A Harris Poll in 1968 gave King a 75% *disapproval* rating, according to *Smithsonian* (April 2018). Wherever King went, angry protesters followed. His house was bombed (nobody was hurt) in 1956; King was attacked and nonfatally stabbed in 1958; and he received constant death threats. Ultimately, he was murdered. Many of the voices opposing King were people who would have described themselves as good Christians. Discuss.

- What do you think of the civil rights movement and the progress it made to promote justice and equality for nonwhite people?
- King was a preacher who quoted the Bible widely to bolster his arguments in talks and writing. Why would white Christians oppose someone who spoke for truth and justice, and who used the Bible to make his case?
- Why do you think King drew such a negative reaction for his work?
- To what degree did racism and prejudice factor into white resistance to King and his work?
- Did you support the civil rights movement back in the 1950s and 1960s? Did your congregation?
- To what degree was the racism and prejudice against African Americans a carryover from the centuries of slavery in America, when white people largely considered Black people "inferior."
- To what degree is white supremacy still at work in our culture?

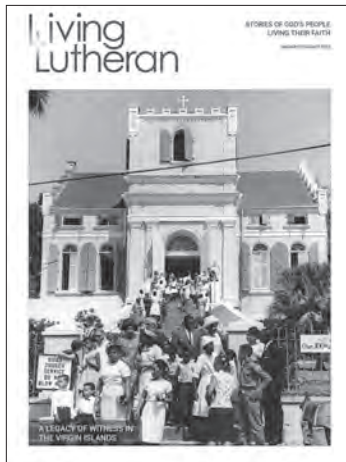
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- Today, how are churches and religious leaders who speak about racism and injustice considered? Are they universally regarded as prophetic, bold and heroic? Explain.
- What can we do better?

EXERCISE 5: WHITE PRIVILEGE

White privilege is a controversial issue in some circles today. But it is unmistakable in the stories of the Lutheran congregations in the Virgin Islands. Discuss:

- In what specific ways did the islands' European residents enjoy privilege over nonwhite residents?
- In what specific ways were the islands' African American residents oppressed and unprivileged?
- Who benefited from the islands' enslavement and oppression of African Americans? How?
- How did white privilege evidence itself in such areas as education, economics and social mobility?
- Did the islands' white residents (who were required to go to church) see their privilege as unjust, improper or immoral? Why or why not?
- Explain why it's hard for the beneficiaries of an unjust system to see and acknowledge the system's injustice, much less to do anything about it. What is it about privilege that creates blind spots?
- In what ways do some white Christians today have a hard time acknowledging white privilege that is evidenced in income inequality, educational disparity, employment opportunities, housing and incarceration?
- How can we as Christians work on that?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Get an overview of the ELCA's ministries by and for people of African Descent by searching for "ELCA African Descent Ministry" at elca.org.
- Explore the work of the ELCA's African Descent Lutheran Association at adlaelca.org.

Check out these important ELCA documents:

- "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture"—the 1993 social statement calls out the sin of racism and outlines actions our church and people of faith can take to help our culture live more harmoniously as a diverse and multicultural society. Statement and accompanying study guide available at elca.org/socialstatements.
- "The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries"—the 2013 social statement talks about the problems in the criminal justice system, including the disparity in arrest, conviction and sentencing between nonwhite and white people. Statement and accompanying study guide available at elca.org/socialstatements.

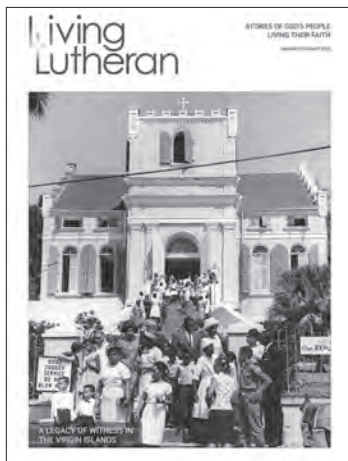
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Study guide: **Oldest ELCA church** *continued*

- “ELCA Declaration to People of African Descent”—this 2019 declaration by the ELCA Church Council offers an *official* apology “to people of African descent for [the Lutheran church’s] historical complicity in slavery and its enduring legacy of racism in the United States and globally.” The declaration and a detailed explanation is available for study, as well as participant materials. Search for the title at elca.org.
- 2005 ELCA African Descent Strategic Plan—this 17-year-old plan outlined an ambitious strategy for diversifying the ELCA, but its goals were not achieved. The follow-up ELCA African Descent Strategy Implementation Plan 2020/2025 reviews the 2005 plan and sets new goals and strategies. Search for both documents by name at elca.org.



THE OLDEST ELCA CHURCH RESIDES IN THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

Founded less than 150 years after Martin Luther's 95 Theses, Frederick Lutheran Church has witnessed more change, growth and conversation on the lives of African descendants than any other church in the Western Hemisphere.

By Nicolette Peñaranda



Frederick in Charlotte Amalie on the island of St. Thomas is the oldest Lutheran church in North America. A team from ELCA African Descent Ministries visited the U.S. Virgin Islands to learn the legacy of the Lutheran churches there for an episode of "Talks at the Desk," a Black History Month visual storytelling project.



Photos: Will Nunnally/ELCA

Nicolette Peñaranda, program director for ELCA African Descent Ministries, gives the children's sermon at Lord God of Sabaoth Lutheran Church in Christiansted, St. Croix. The congregation's legacy began in 1734.

Photo: ELCA Archives



If someone were to ask you to name the oldest Lutheran church in the Western Hemisphere, would you know it is Frederick Lutheran Church on St. Thomas Island? Would you believe them if they told you it is a Black Lutheran church in the New World that was founded less than 150 years after Martin Luther wrote the 95 Theses?

The ELCA has an intriguing history, but a huge grip of it is the undiscussed stories found in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Members of the ELCA's African Descent Ministries team spent a week on the islands on a pilgrimage and to film an episode for the next season of "Talks at the Desk," a Black History Month visual storytelling project premiering in February on the ELCA's social media channels.

The team landed at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport in September 2022, named after the St. Croix-born Tuskegee Airman. A few days later, the crew sat down with his widow, Joyce Rohlsen, a member of Lord God of Sabaoth Lutheran Church (LGOS), Christiansted, St. Croix. The two married at Lutheran Church of the Epiphany in Hempstead, N.Y., only to relocate to the islands after serving in the military.

This bit of modern history is only a taste of the rich legacy that lingers across the Caribbean Synod.

The legacy begins

The islands house seven historic Lutheran churches once colonized by several countries, though most are associated with the Danes. Although originally stewarded land of the Tainos and Arawak Indigenous communities, the Danish Kingdom later occupied the stolen islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John for their own desires.

These lucrative agricultural communities soon became the cash cows of the empire through the labor of enslaved Africans who produced sugar cane, cotton and tobacco. After a six-month slave rebellion on St. John in 1733, it was clear that the production of the islands was fragile. St. Thomas, though, differed from the other islands because it became a trading community early on rather than a plantation economy. This made its success less dependent on the subjection of enslaved Africans.

The slavery context may feel out of place when exploring the historic Lutheran church until one realizes that the founding of Frederick in 1666 was only a few years before the Danes officially acquired the island of St. Thomas in 1671 and LGOS was established in 1734, the year after St. Croix was purchased from France. The Lutheran church was embedded into the culture and politics of the islands since their inception.

Both churches named so happen to be the political congregations of the time. Both settled on slightly

elevated landscapes, a walking distance from the ports of trade, and previously housed in the nearby forts that protected the islands.

Frederick and LGOS both share similar architectural styles, though the latter is much smaller. The two have dynamic steps leading to the oversized front doors of the church. Inside the entrance are parallel staircases that lead to the balcony where enslaved Africans were forced to sit. One service was in Danish and the second in Dutch Creole. When Africans and Europeans worshiped together, Africans weren't permitted to stand on the main floor, reserved for the European church families. The 18th-century boxed pews had their own rankings, with particular pews reserved for Danish government officials.

IT WAS COMMON PRACTICE THAT WHEN THE GOVERNOR WAS NOT ON ST. THOMAS, THE LUTHERAN PASTOR ACTED IN HIS PLACE.

The pews weren't the only place where church and state aligned. Frederick's parsonage was intentionally built right next to the governor's house on St. Thomas. The two homes sit even higher up on the hills that look out to the bay.

It was common practice that when the governor was not on St. Thomas, the Lutheran pastor acted in his place. This was in addition to the labor of Frederick's pastor also serving Nazareth Lutheran Church on St. John's at least once a month.

All people on the islands were expected to attend church on Sundays. The authority of the church was so substantial it had the power to incarcerate those who didn't attend Sunday service. That narrative is present to this day: "Frederick Church? The one that threw people in jail!" The parsonage also had particular rooms on the top floor that operated as a jail for enslaved Africans rebuking slavery.

Journey to emancipation

St. Thomas had a huge amount of political influence and was deeply tied to the oppression of an entire baptized community of Black Lutherans, but it was the island of St. Croix that contained some of the most significant rebellions in Virgin Islands history. Being a more densely populated island filled with plantations

EMANCIPATION BROUGHT WIDE CELEBRATIONS ON THE ISLANDS, BUT THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY AND EQUITY DIDN'T END THERE.

and slave labor, St. Croix's enslaved Africans faced more of the physically demanding and inhumane aspects of slavery.

LGOS resided on the eastern Christiansted region of the island, but a majority of farms were on the western Frederiksted region, home of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church.

On July 3, 1848, as Africans began to rebel and call for a mass revolution across the plantations, Gov. Peter von Scholten proclaimed emancipation from LGOS' steps, got into his carriage, and rode over 16 miles to the Fredriksted pier and declared the same, nearly two decades before the United States would abolish the practice itself.

The Lutheran church not only played into the oppression but also the liberation of a people within a 150-year span. It leads to the question: What was stopping the church from liberating people in the first place?

St. John, also a plantation economy, suffered similarly before emancipation. As the British Virgin Islands ended slavery in 1838, enslaved Africans were so desperate for their freedom that they found themselves on the now-infamous Mary's Point overlooking the Tortola shore. There, they jumped into the ocean in an attempt to swim to freedom. Stories continue today about sharks lingering by that cliff where people claim to see red in the water.

But the culture of St. John looks wildly different from that of St. Croix and St. Thomas. The intimately sized city of love has an even smaller population of residents, with less public resources than the other islands but a significant European and upper-class presence. Though this doesn't change the struggles of poverty across the island, it does suggest a unique post-emancipation (integration) story that differs from its sibling islands.

Emancipation brought wide celebrations on the islands, but the struggle for equality and equity didn't end there. The St. Croix Labor Riot in 1878 erupted

Rosa Samuel, a member of Nazareth, Cruz Bay, St. John, was interviewed for "Talks at the Desk" to share the story of the Lutheran church's legacy in the U.S. Virgin Islands.



Mae Helen Jackson (right), young adult outreach and program director for the ELCA, leads a conversation for young adults with Merle I. Malone, pastor of Frederick. While it has a long legacy in the Virgin Islands, the value of the Lutheran church is not universally felt in younger generations.





THIS HISTORY HAS PUT THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE
VIRGIN ISLANDS IN A VERY
PARTICULAR PLACE.

after farmers tried to prevent Africans from pursuing an education. There's an irony to the fact that the Moravian Church and sometimes even Lutherans were adamant about educating Black youth, except in areas dependent on cheap or free labor, often by the same people in the church pews.

After several days of burning and looting, on top of the hurricane and subsequent earthquake and tsunami in 1867, the Virgin Islands' economic strength weakened enough to reduce the Danish desires to continue exploitation. The United States would spend the next several decades trying to purchase the islands, further expanding the American occupation of the West Indies.

A long legacy

This history has put the Lutheran church of the Virgin Islands in a very particular place. The Danish interpretation of slavery still demanded all people to maintain morally good standing among the community. Being a baptized Christian and a weekly worshipping member, regardless of race, has led to a long legacy of Black Lutherans on St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John, including Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, the U.S. Virgin Islands' delegate in the House of Representatives.

Some elders have documented themselves as fourth- and fifth-generation Lutherans, dating their affiliation to the pre-emancipation church. Others in the community who may not be worshipping members have shared stories of being brought from the countryside on a trucklike vehicle across the island simply to attend a Lutheran church because that is what was important to their families.

But the value of the Lutheran church is not universally felt in younger generations. As church workers continue to deconstruct history and comprehend how slavery influenced colorism, internalized racism, the disenfranchisement of Black communities and the mental colonization of elders, younger generations struggle to relate to a faith that was used to validate slavery.

When talking about the ELCA to faithful young adults at Frederick, a woman asked, "How does the ELCA talk about colonialism?"

Black mainland Lutherans today have had to toil with this question of their faith and racism forever. Being on the mainland means African Americans have a different slavery story. Black institutions were

formed differently, and faith is not based solely with Luther. Rather, African Americans have leaned into the theology of the ancestors, those who coined the term Black Liberation Theology and Womanist Theology. Black mainlanders have the deep influence of other African American-founded traditions that impact their communities because of the interfaith relationships and ecumenism that is more commonly found in Black Zip codes.

While Black and Brown communities challenge the ELCA to address racism and colonialism, African Americans have sought their own understandings of Christian faith and resistance invoked in the ancestors, as they come from generations of survivors. What does one say to a community of churches that are just starting to see young generations asking how elders reconcile being part of the incarcerated church while Black?

The other reality is that American faith is as much theology as it is buildings and locations. Church workers can't preach about being a decolonized Lutheran church if the pulpits are in the buildings that sit on top of the hills that looked at the slave ships entering port. The same way people can't claim to decolonize while being in a 1950s church in the inner ring suburbs after a fleet of Bohemian Lutherans left a downtown area because the neighborhoods were "changing."

One can find liberation in Luther's teaching of grace while still refuting the opportunity for youth to be educated or maintaining a form of economy that is dependent on people's labor being exploited. This question is not for Black mainlanders to answer to Black siblings in the U.S. Virgin Islands but rather to be in accompaniment with them as they discern how collective organizing can move the church with the next generation.

This is a witness that is not shared widely enough and why it was important for the "Talks at the Desk" team to highlight the islands. The ELCA dreams of a future church model that is new, young and diverse. But the same areas of interest are those that are already thriving in their own silos. "Talks at the Desk" gives the church an opportunity to share in this witness and reimagine our commitments to already established new, young and or diverse communities. Perhaps this is also an invitation for the church to be better stewards to the historical ministries that make the church both holy and whole. †

The second season of "Talks at the Desk" will be available in February. To watch it or the previous season, search for "Talks at the Desk" at [YouTube.org](https://www.youtube.com) or search for "African Descent Ministry" at [elca.org](https://www.elca.org). Download a study guide for this article at [livinglutheran.org](https://www.livinglutheran.org) by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab.

Nazareth is within a hundred yards of stepping off the ferry docks on the island of St. John. The congregation was organized in 1720.