



Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

305 E Street, NW • Suite 300 • Washington, D.C. • 20001

October 7, 2020

Dear Beloved Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod,

We, the members of Synod Council, write to you to convey the aches of our hearts in this moment of racial reckoning for our country. We lament for the sins of racial injustice and white supremacy, and we recommit to building a more just and equitable society. The Synod Council has engaged in discernment together over what is ours to do, what is ours to learn, and how we might lead the synod in this moment with faithfulness and integrity. Through this letter, we acknowledge that our engagement with, and commitment to, these issues must continue and we invite you to join us in this lament, learning, and next steps.

Invitation and Introduction

We wish to state at the outset that some of the content of this letter may make you uncomfortable. The histories and present realities of systemic white supremacy and racism are harsh and touch all of us. For people of color this narrative may stir memories of harm and betrayal. For white people this letter may spur feelings of resistance and defensiveness. We honor these feelings because we have felt them ourselves, and we invite you to consider more closely what is prompting them. As followers of Christ, we are called to wholeness by Jesus' death and resurrection. We cannot begin to build a more equitable and just world until we acknowledge how the corporate sin of white supremacy and racism harms each of us, albeit in different ways. Examining our discomfort, individually and in supportive community, is part of this journey and is a necessary step in moving toward equity and justice.

Further, we acknowledge that we are one of a small number of synods within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) led by a person of color. With this in mind, we wish to state our support of – and confidence in – Bishop Leila Ortiz and the rostered ministers of color in our synod. As the governing body of the synod, we support the faithful engagement of these leaders and all rostered ministers working to dismantle white supremacy and racism.

Bearing Witness

First, we acknowledge the events that have transpired over the more than 100 days since the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. We witness the calls for justice, and join the many voices in declaring that Black Lives Matter¹ and are sacred. We regret the silence and lack of action that has followed the deaths of too many Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) caused by those who serve as police officers. We lament over the excessive use of force on any individuals, and reject the ease and frequency with which police interactions escalate to violence. We condemn anyone who inflicts violence on peaceful protestors and anyone who uses Christian symbols to justify such acts.

¹ <https://www.elca.org/blacklivesmatter>



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Second, we acknowledge that racism is America's original sin and for more than 400 years white people have inflicted violence, legalized discrimination, and death on BIPOC people in North America. Even when laws that allowed overt discrimination have changed, white people have continued to benefit from social systems and structures, policies and practices that advantage them at the expense of people of color. In the past, many white churches actively supported slavery, Jim Crow segregation laws, and lynchings. Even now, many white churches have been silent in the face of ongoing discrimination against people of color and complicit in perpetuating racial injustices, under new structures and systems, policies and practices. Despite our stated good intentions, the actions and inactions of predominantly white churches have not translated into equitable and just outcomes in our witness of the Gospel.

Our silence only gives cover to racist policies, practices, and systems. There are no sidelines. Remaining neutral in situations of injustice leaves us on the side of the oppressor.

Third, we acknowledge with the ELCA and our synod that we have been complicit with and have contributed to racism and white supremacy. When the ELCA formed in 1988, it committed to attaining ten percent people of color among its membership within ten years. Further, the Churchwide Assembly in 1993 adopted a social statement on Race, Ethnicity, and Culture² urging the study of institutional racism and charging congregations to "move beyond an 'assimilation' approach to culture." We, as the church, have failed to live up to this vision. Recently the Pew Research Center³ found the ELCA to be the "whitest of the white churches," and notions of what it means to be Lutheran too often remain white and euro-centric.

We applaud the Declaration of the ELCA to people of African Descent⁴ at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. We also note with regret that the very same organization that officially received the declaration – the African Descent Lutheran Association – was asked to write the declaration. A group receiving an apology should not be asked to write it. Further, we lament how clergy of color are often more harshly criticized and unfairly treated by systems within the church, including in candidacy as well as discipline and appeals processes. Finally, we note that the financial and structural independence of congregations within the ELCA often separates each congregation from joining in a shared mission, in some cases leading more affluent congregations not to view the struggles of congregations with fewer financial resources as their problem, a dynamic that often falls along racial lines.

² <https://www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements/race-ethnicity-and-culture>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>

⁴ <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Ethnic-Specific-and-Multicultural-Ministries/African-Descent>



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Fourth, we also find hope in the ways the ELCA, the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod, our congregations, and society at-large are making progress towards racial justice and greater racial consciousness. We applaud the work of the 2015 Synod Assembly for producing a resolution calling on congregations to engage in an examination of their systems and processes for bias. Many congregations took up the mantle laid down by this resolution, and we honor the work of those faithful leaders and communities. We applaud the synod's Racial Equity Team for the trainings and resources they have shared with the synod since that time, including the memorial service in honor of the Emanuel Nine on the 5th anniversary of that tragedy, committed by a young man raised in an ELCA congregation. Further, we applaud Bishop Ortiz and our synod staff for organizing Imago Dei: Embracing the Image of God – A Racial Equity Series this summer.

What is Ours to Do

While appreciative of these recent developments by synod leaders and congregations, the Synod Council also recognizes that the scope of our work to dismantle white supremacy and end racism requires sustained commitment and long-term investment in order for meaningful amends to take shape. Additionally, we acknowledge that our geographic location, containing both the nation's capital and surrounding areas, as well as the demographic diversity of our synod makes it untenable for us to ignore the injustices we see and experience firsthand. This proximity has shaped our discernment of next steps and informs our leadership of the synod.

In light of this history, discernment, and the Gospel's call,

- We affirm that Black Lives Matter and are sacred;
- We declare our support for the prompt review and significant reform needed within police departments, including demilitarization of police departments; greater investments in non-violent social services; and peaceful demonstrations to dismantle white supremacy and end racism;
- We support investments by the synod in continued racial equity trainings for clergy, staff, and laypeople to raise racial awareness and move our institutions to embody an actively anti-racist posture;
- We support investments by the synod to contract with equity, diversity, and inclusion experts that can support the synod in becoming actively anti-racist;
- We support the formation of a team within the synod to examine how the synod may engage in meaningful reparations to people of color;
- We support the examination of institutional processes within the synod, including candidacy, discipline, and appeals, to identify how we can insert checks into these processes for anti-Black and racist biases;
- We support outreach to and engagement with our ecumenical partners in learning about similar efforts they have undertaken and opportunities for collaboration;
- We urge all rostered ministers in this synod, as they were in the 1993 social statement, to preach and lead in support of racial equity and justice; and



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- We invite all of our congregations and congregational members to engage in the study of these issues and to actively work in their own lives and communities to increase racial consciousness and seek the creation of an anti-racist society.

We, as the Synod Council, commit to issuing a plan describing steps and goals related to the above affirmations by April 1, 2021.

We as Lutherans have a powerful message and witness to share in the gospel of Jesus Christ through the extraordinary and abundant gift of God's grace. In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, he proclaims, "Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep" (Rom. 13:11). This is the time we have been given to be in ministry with one another as siblings in this holy work.

We pray that together all congregations and members of this synod will actively join us in this work. We pray that our commitment will not falter and that this letter will not join the list of other statements by the church that were not lived into. We pray that synod leaders will be transparent in actions and learnings related to this statement, sharing with the synod both stories of progress and stories of struggle. We pray that we may know and feel Jesus' accompanying presence as we journey together.

In Christ,

Members of the Synod Council 2020-2021*

Bishop Leila Ortiz
Julie Hamre, Treasurer
Sheena Foster
Cynthia Reese
Jennifer Slagle Peck
The Rev. David Trott

Jackson Droney, Vice President
Barbara Bilodeau
Ashelyn Mosby
The Rev. Angela Shannon
Michael Sonnenberg
Madelyn W.

*At the time the council issued this letter, there were 18 members of the Synod Council. Six chose not to sign this letter.



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Appendix of Additional Resources

Synod Resources

- Synod Racial Equity Team's recommended [reading list](#)
- Bishop Ortiz's recommended [reading list](#)
- Imago Dei Web [Series](#)
- Transforming White Supremacy [Toolkit](#)

Additional Reading

- *Disrupting White Supremacy from Within*, edited by Jennifer Harvey, Karin Case, and Robin Hawley Gorsline.
- American Friends Service Committee's [resource page](#)
- Coracle's Resources of Racial Healing & Justice [page](#)

Video Resources

- American Friends Service Committee's free [e-course](#), Radical Acting in Faith for White People
- [The Color of Compromise](#), available on Amazon

Audio Resources

- On Being's Krista Tippett [interview](#) with Resmaa Menakem