

A Statement from Members of the Conference of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

“How long, O Lord, how long?”

Once again, in 2 separate incidents, black men have been shot and killed by police officers. The toxic combination of racism and violence has become all too familiar. The later shooting of numerous police officers at the end of a peaceful rally only raises the tension and despair.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has gone on record opposing racism, and opposing violence, including in the criminal justice system. Yet our reality does not measure up to our ideals. As a denomination, the ELCA ranks at the bottom of almost all church bodies in terms of racial diversity. The explanations are many and various—northern European origins, rural settlements. But the fact remains that plenty of other denominations with similar histories have managed to become far more diverse. We have a problem, and part of the problem is our own racism. We might as well own it.

The United States (and the colonies beforehand) have had a long story of racism, beginning with the Doctrine of Discovery, which declared that non-Christian indigenous peoples were savages with no rights, and that European Christians have a moral obligation to take their land and subdue them. Soon thereafter the first Africans were brought to the Americas as slaves. This country that we love and respect was built on the dehumanizations of the original inhabitants of the land, and the involuntary servitude of millions of others.

So when there is an all-too-frequent tragic death that involves racism and violence, we are tempted to comb through details, looking for reasons—someone to blame, extenuating circumstances. But the fact remains that there is pattern to these incidents—a pattern of racism and violence. It is a pattern that we can and must break.

As Americans we like to think of ourselves as leaders, with a lot to teach the rest of the world. And we do have things to teach the rest of the world. But we also have things to learn from the rest of the world. It is time to get over our arrogance in thinking we have all the answers. We could learn from South Africa about race relations. We could learn from Canada about justice for indigenous peoples. We could learn from Australia about gun violence.

As Lutheran Christians in the United States, ELCA Lutherans with the least diversity of any US denomination except the National Baptists, we must begin our response to racially motivated violence with deep repentance for our own participation in the history of violence, racism and injustice. We must be involved in healing, but only after confession.

We can demand justice, and we can demand change. But only if we are prepared to engage in it ourselves. Racism and violence are systemic—and we are part of the system that

perpetuates itself through racism and violence. We do not have the choice to distance ourselves from the very system in which we all live and work and exercise our Christian callings.

We pray for those who have suffered losses, and who continue to suffer losses. We pray for a change of heart for those who have committed violence and injustice. We pray for healing. And we commit ourselves to change.

May God have mercy.

The Justice Ready Bench of the ELCA Conference of Bishops

Bishop Jeff Barrow
Bishop Jessica Crist
Bishop Guy Erwin
Bishop Mark Holmerud
Bishop Kirby Unti
Bishop Shelley Wickstrom

Other Members of the Conference of Bishops

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July 12, 2016