

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



A Social Statement on:

FREED IN CHRIST: RACE, ETHNICITY, AND CULTURE

Adopted by a more than two-thirds majority vote as a social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by the third Churchwide Assembly on August 31, 1993, at Kansas City, Missouri.

FACING GOD

1. A Time of Vision

For us as members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America there is one God and one Lord, Jesus Christ, “. . . through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:6).

Scripture speaks of one humanity, created by God. It recounts our rebellion and enslavement to sin. Scripture tells of a diverse people reconciled to God through the blood of the cross, a people set free for the work of reconciliation. It heralds a new freedom and future in one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

If the story of Babel is of a people scattered, the story of Pentecost is of a people called and gathered. Christ brings together the scattered children of God (John 11:52). The Holy Spirit breathes the freedom of the Gospel into the Church, where every people under heaven is represented.

A humanity enslaved to sin has been set free; a Church has been gathered in freedom. Cultural differences still matter, but they can be seen for what God intends—blessings rather than means of enslavement.

2. A Time of Confession

The Church is built on the confession made by Peter (Matthew 16:13-20) and by Martha (John 11:1-27), when they declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God. From age to age the Church proclaims Christ, who was crucified for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Romans 4:25).

The Church confesses Christ, who has broken down the dividing wall (Ephesians 2:14). Christ, our peace, has put an end to the hostility of race, ethnicity, gender, and economic class. The Church proclaims Christ, confident this good news sets at liberty those captive behind walls of hostility (cf. Luke 4:18).

The Church looks toward the freedom of the reign of God, announced by and embodied in Jesus. But Christians live between the “now” of the reign of God and the “not yet” of its fulfillment. Trusting the promise of freedom, we can face the fact that each of us is captive, each of us is in bondage to sin (1 John 1:8).

Therefore, we confess our sinfulness. Because we are sinners as well as saints, we rebuild walls broken down by Christ. We fall back into enslaving patterns of injustice. We betray the truth that sets us free. Because we are saints as well as sinners, we reach for the freedom that is ours in Christ.

3. A Time of Commitment

We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with the whole Church, look forward to the time when people will come from east and west, north and south to eat in the reign of God (Luke 13:29). For the Church catholic, diversity of cultures is both a given and a glimpse of the future.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has roots in church bodies with a strong immigrant history. These churches kept the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3) in ways appropriate to the cultural background of their membership. Besides preserving the faith, they furthered mission and ministry.

The Christ to whom the Church witnesses is the Christ who breaks down walls of cultural exclusivity (Mark 7:24-29; John 4). We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have recognized ourselves to be in mission and ministry in a multicultural society, and have committed ourselves to welcome cultural diversity. Given our history, the commitment was neither quick nor easy.

The commitment was made, though, in these and other ways:

- ◆ the goal that, within the first ten years of its existence, ten percent of this church’s membership would be African American, Asian, Hispanic, or Native American;
- ◆ the adoption of an organizational principle providing for the representation of cultural diversity on churchwide staff and on boards and other decision-making bodies;
- ◆ the creation of a Commission for Multicultural Ministries and adoption of a Multicultural Mission Strategy;
- ◆ the encouragement of African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American associations; the recognition of the Slovak Zion Synod and German, Hungarian, Finnish, and Danish special interest conferences; the regard for distinctive cultures, such as the Appalachian culture; the assertion that deafness leads to the creation of a unique language and culture, and a new context for ministry;
- ◆ the effort to start and to support ministry in African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, or multicultural settings; the effort to recognize and to empower pastoral leaders while honoring their cultures; the effort to provide resources in languages other than English;

- ◆ the public policy advocacy at state, federal, and international levels that seeks to eliminate racial or ethnic discrimination; the private sector advocacy that encourages corporate social responsibility for community development;
- ◆ the attention to inclusivity by seminaries, colleges, and social ministry organizations of the church; and
- ◆ the respect for cultural diversity in the work of global mission.

4. A Time of Spiritual Crisis*

We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rejoice in our freedom in Christ Jesus. But we know we must persevere in *our commitment* to follow Christ and to serve neighbor, and live up to our specific *commitments*. While we have taken many measures fitting to a church in mission and ministry in a multicultural society, we still falter.

We falter in what we do, or in refusing to carry out what we have promised to do. We falter through ignorance of what we have done or left undone. We falter when we cling to old ideas that prevent us from becoming the people God calls us to be.

With all Christians everywhere, members of this church live in a time of crisis (Romans 2:1 ff.). We are torn between the freedom offered in Christ, the new Adam, and the captivity known by the old Adam. We are torn between becoming the people God calls us to be and remaining the people we are, barricaded behind old walls of hostility.

The social, economic, and political dimensions of the crisis are acute, and indications of it abound. A burning cross reminds us that blatant acts of intimidation, hatred, and violence continue. A critical look reminds us of barriers that are more insidious.

The source of this many-faceted crisis, however, is profoundly spiritual. We will rise to the crisis, not by making a longer list of commitments, but by persisting with repentant hearts.

FACING OBSTACLES

1. A Time to Take Culture Seriously

We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America too often react fearfully or grudgingly to the diversity of cultures. We are to delight in the fact that the people called, gathered, and enlightened have such diversity. We are, as a multicultural church, to minister in a diverse but divided society.

Culture includes music, art, and dance, but is more than that. Culture—the attitudes and patterns of life—plays a part in setting priorities, developing procedures, and choosing expressions of faith.

This church has not moved much beyond an “assimilation” approach to culture, where the assimilated are those who adopt the values and behavior of the dominant culture. This keeps us from benefiting

from the plurality of cultures already present in our church, and from appreciating the plurality of cultures in society.

This church clearly shares the brokenness of a society that has responded to cultural diversity through fear and efforts at assimilation. Our society has melded many European ethnic groups into mainstream America, but it has included people of other cultural identities only insofar as they have taken on the values and behavior of the dominant culture.

A wall of hostility stands intact. Captive on one side of the wall, people with access to opportunities and institutions are largely unaware either of their own cultural biases or the worth of other cultures. On the other side of the wall, people scarred by slavery and other forms of degradation and suffering have seen their cultures ridiculed and reviled, or destroyed.

2. A Time to Confront Racism

All of us sin and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

Racism—a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice—is sin, a violation of God’s intention for humanity. The resulting racial, ethnic, or cultural barriers deny the truth that all people are God’s creatures and, therefore, persons of dignity. Racism fractures and fragments both church and society.

When we speak of racism as though it were a matter of personal attitudes only, we underestimate it. We have only begun to realize the complexity of the sin, which spreads like an infection through the entire social system. Racism infects and affects everyone, with an impact that varies according to race, ethnicity, or culture, and other factors such as gender or economic situation.

This church has often addressed words on racism to white members. We have done so because our mission and ministry are in a society where white people have been favored and hold unequal power to implement their prejudices—socially, politically, and economically. What has been the case is *still* the case: skin color makes a difference and white people benefit from a privileged position.

Racism, however, infects and affects everyone. It deforms relationships between and within racial, ethnic, or cultural groups. It undermines the promise of community and exacerbates prejudice and unhealthy competition among these groups. It robs white people of the possibility of authentic relationships with people of color, and people of color of the possibility of authentic relationships with white people.

Racism also can lead to the rejection of self, as when white people internalize guilt or people of color internalize values associated with white culture. It hinders us from becoming who God calls us to be.

When we rebuild walls of hostility and live behind them—blaming others for the problem and looking to them for solutions—we ignore the role we ourselves play in the problem and also in the solution. When we confront racism and move toward fairness and justice in society, all of us benefit.

3. A Time to Be the Church

Vision breaks through brokenness. We are one in Christ. As the body of Christ, we are free to live out our connectedness with each other. Promises are kept when vision is communicated in word and deed, and members are captured by it. For this to happen, we need the leadership of all who have been given responsibility and authority: members of congregations and their pastors; boards and staff of institutions and agencies of the church; synodical bishops; and the bishop of this church.

We expect our leadership to name the sin of racism and lead us in our repentance of it. Although racism affects each one of us differently, we must take responsibility for our participation, acknowledge our complicity, repent of our sin, and pray God will bring us to reconciliation.

Racism, both blatant and subtle, continues to deny the reconciling work of the cross. God's forgiveness frees us from the enslavement of racism. For some, this may mean giving up power or privilege; for others, it may mean giving up anger or prejudice. Let us know this reconciliation in our lives!

We expect our leadership to persevere in their challenge to us to be in mission and ministry in a multicultural society. The Church catholic already has diversity of cultures. For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, catholicity is a given. Members will question, however, why intentional measures have been taken in order for us to be a multicultural church.

Because of sin and indifference, intentional measures *are* necessary for vision to become reality. We expect our leadership to clarify why measures were taken, and to help members deal with the implications of such measures.

DOING JUSTICE

1. A Time for Public Leadership

Our world is one where racial and ethnic lines are drawn and enforced. Our world is one where hostility festers along those dividing lines, often bursting out in violence. Our world is one where power and prejudice combine in bitter oppression.

But God has not gathered the Church as yet one more example of brokenness. The Church exists to proclaim Jesus the Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection mean freedom for the world. The Church also exists to teach the law of God, announcing that the God who justifies expects all people to do justice.

So, the Church must cry out for justice, and thereby resist the cynicism fueled by visions that failed and dreams that died. The Church must insist on justice, and thereby refuse to blame victimized people for their situations. The Church must insist on justice, and thereby assure participation of all people.

The Church that pursues justice will face and address difficult social, political, and economic problems such as:

- ◆ how racism must be confronted in order to build a society where diversity is truly valued;
- ◆ how race and ethnicity figure in political decisions on immigration, crime, and environmental pollution; and
- ◆ how economic forces work against people of color in housing, medical care, education, and employment.

In its pursuit of justice, this church must question responses that are quick, easy, and, therefore, probably inadequate.

2. A Time for Public Witness

The Church that confesses Christ in public demonstrates its commitment through involvement in public life—globally and locally, nationally and in neighborhoods. Through public events such as elections or town meetings, through public bodies such as legislatures or volunteer groups, church members help to forge political will and consensus.

Participation in public life is essential to doing justice and undoing injustice. Only when people affected by racial and ethnic division speak publicly of painful realities, does there emerge the possibility of justice for everyone.

In places served by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, however, public life is too often in sorry shape, shallow, and fragmented. Increasingly cynical or simply bored, many residents ignore public debate. Many find it difficult to participate fully because of racial or ethnic barriers, or economic hardship.

This church, therefore, will actively promote a public life worthy of the name. We encourage public witness by members, and stand publicly as a church against injustice. We insist on a public forum accessible to everyone, since the interests of everyone are at stake.

3. A Time for Public Deliberation

One way that we, the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, will promote a better public life is through example. This church has already committed itself to a moral deliberation that deals openly with conflict and controversy. In fact, such deliberation has helped us to discover new dimensions of mission and new possibilities for ministry.

This church will live up to its commitment to deliberation. Specifically, we will:

- model an honest engagement with issues of race, ethnicity and culture, by
 - ◆ being a community of mutual conversation, mutual correction, and mutual consolation;
 - ◆ model a healthy and healing response to the change that inevitably comes from cultural contact;

- ◆ model exchanges in which people of different cultures can find points of agreement while sometimes “agreeing to disagree;”
- ◆ encourage and participate in the education of young people, in order that they might be better equipped to live in a multicultural society;
- ◆ bring together parties in conflict, creating space for deliberation; and
- ◆ participate in identifying the demands of justice, and work with others who would have justice for all.

4. A Time for Advocacy

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America received from its predecessor church bodies a solid foundation upon which to build advocacy for justice and opposition to racial and ethnic discrimination. We will listen to our advocates as we examine our own institutional life, and will model that for which we call.

Our advocacy will take place in partnership ecumenically, among corporations and local, state, and national governments. We look for positive incentives for change and fair distribution of the social costs of correcting past wrongs. We will work for respect of cultures, for example in mass media and public presentations, in art and advertising, and in other endeavors. We will speak against policy initiatives that discriminate on the basis of language.

This church will support legislation, ordinances, and resolutions that guarantee to all persons equally:

- ◆ civil rights, including full protection of the law and redress under the law of discriminatory practices; and to all citizens, the right to vote;
- ◆ access to quality education, health care, and nutrition;
- ◆ opportunity for employment with fair compensation, and possibilities for job training and education, apprenticeship, promotion, and union membership;
- ◆ opportunity for business ownership;
- ◆ access to legal, banking, and insurance services;
- ◆ the right to rent, buy, and occupy housing in any place; and
- ◆ access to public transportation and accommodation.

We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will advocate for just immigration policies, including fairness in visa regulations and in admitting and protecting refugees. We will work for policies that cause neither undue repercussions within immigrant communities nor bias against them.

Our efforts on behalf of local and international community and in opposition to racism will recognize the multicultural nature of the world. We will promote international respect for human rights, and support the international movement to eliminate discrimination.

Addendum

Social Statements in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, adopted by the 1989 Churchwide Assembly, states that an addendum shall be added to those statements that elicit significant division in the Churchwide Assembly. The following amendment (at the point indicated in the text) received support at the Churchwide Assembly but not the vote needed for approval.

*—We of the ELCA with all Christians everywhere live in a time of crisis (Romans 2:1ff). We are faced with choices and decisions which mean success or failure, life or death. The Church cannot remain silent while the cross, symbol of Christ's death to set us free, remains an instrument of racial, ethnic, and cultural hatred and evil. Cross burnings continue as acts of intimidation, hatred, and evil. Groups which espouse racial, ethnic, and cultural purity and which foster acts of racial and cultural annihilation recruit youth as well as adults. Ethnic centrality (racial, ethnic, and cultural purity) and economic instability give rise to worldwide acts of rioting, hatred, and violence. Some U.S. corporations exploit people of color in poorer nations by employing these people at below living wages to work in sweatshop conditions like those long outlawed in the United States, while efforts at economic self-sufficiency by people of color in the United States are resisted and undermined. Racism also creates identity and self-esteem crises for children of color, particularly those of interracial heritage.

Christ calls upon us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:27). Christ does not qualify this mandate. A major part of the crisis is over lack of experience or knowledge of those whose race, ethnicity, and culture differ from our own.

The social, economic, and political dimensions of the crisis are acute. We consider the source of the crisis to be profoundly spiritual. The activist Christ threw the money changers out of the temple. The Church must continue to take an activist role. We must make a choice. Are we going to continue barricaded behind old walls of ignorance and hostility or are we going to be the people God calls us to be?

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