



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

**May 31, 2022**

To all our siblings in Christ in the ELCA,

It was an honor to be given the task and opportunity to listen to the stories of members of the Sierra Pacific Synod who have suffered from abuse resulting from acts of racism. We do not use the word ‘trauma’ lightly to describe the devastating effect on many people. Our report seeks to tell their stories as a way of revealing racist actions for what they are, and pleading with the Church for justice.

It has recently been brought to our attention that in our response to the “Presiding Bishop’s Report to the Church,” we used language that was insensitive to members of the autistic and other differently abled communities. We apologize for our thoughtlessness, and appreciate the admonition to become more aware of any ableist language that devalues or otherwise harms persons in that community.

In partnership and agreement with the Office of the Presiding Bishop, we look forward to working together to strengthen the unity of the ELCA and increase our awareness of racism and our response to the harm that it does. We also seek to hold one another faithful to the promises made in the Affirmation of our Baptism — that we will strive for justice and peace on all the earth.

We seek your partnership in these efforts.

The Rev. Margaret Payne, retired bishop of the New England Synod

The Rev. Constanze Hagmaier, bishop of the South Dakota Synod

Roberto Lara, president of the Latino Ministries Association of the ELCA

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# LISTENING TEAM REPORT REGARDING THE ACTIONS OF THE SIERRA PACIFIC SYNOD

**A confidential report prepared for the ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, and recommended for distribution with the ELCA Conference of Bishops, ELCA Church Council, Latiné Leaders in the ELCA, and for wider distribution in the ELCA.**

**29 April 2022**

**Note:** The reader should note that the italicized pronouns *they/them/their*, meant to express use in a singular form when referring to an individual's preferred pronoun, will be used throughout the document. Additionally, the affected Latiné community has changed names during its journey, and to help the reader understand this report more easily, we will refer to it as “the Community” (capital C). In the same fashion, throughout the document, we will refer to the ELCA Listening Team as “the Team” (capital T).

**The reader is advised that the following description of events leading up to and on the day of December 12, 2021, as well as everything following, are based on testimonials offered to the Team. Contradictory information or discrepancies observed by the team will be included in this narrative. The reader is also invited to explore [this article](#) and learn more about the significance of the Feast of the Lady of Guadalupe, especially for the Mexican-American community.**

## OVERVIEW

On March 8, 2022, [ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton appointed a listening panel](#) (the Team) of three people to review the actions of Bishop Megan Rohrer with regard to Misión Latina Luterana (the Community) on December 12, 2021, the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Team's primary goal was to gather information and make recommendations to Presiding Bishop Eaton for next steps. The present report results from a research process, including its recommendations. For contextual purposes, this report explores actions leading up to the events on December 12, the aftermath, and

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additional considerations such as the uses and misuses of social media in our church, the effects of said actions to the ELCA Latiné community and communities of color, the collateral harm to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and the potential risk that these actions represent for the future growth of our church. Based on the information received, the Team offers a series of recommendations:

- Recommendations for the Sierra Pacific Synod
  - Reparations for the Community
  - Acknowledgment and Transparency
  - Enforced Membership Diversity Requirements for all Synod Groups
- Recommendations for the Churchwide Expression
  - Assist in Reparations for the Community
  - Publicize a Statement of Apology and Accountability
  - Plan Ongoing Anti-racism Training for the Churchwide Staff, the Lutheran Center, and the Conference of Bishops
- Recommendations for the Office of the Presiding Bishop
  - A Healing Visit to the Community
  - Review of Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline
  - Creation of a Crisis Management Advisory Team
  - Creation of a Task Force to Review Policies and Procedures of the ELCA

Finally, the Team highlights the reported conducts that are incompatible with the character of the ministerial office that is grounds for discipline of rostered ministers, according to the [ELCA Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline of Rostered Ministers](#). The following grounds for discipline describe actions observed in the findings of this report: *(i)* Integrity, *(ii)* Professional attention to duties, *(iii)* Hateful speech or actions, and *(iv)* Abusive activity. Based on the facts and testimonials in this report — and in an effort to protect BIPOC communities in this church — we recommend that the Presiding Bishop bring disciplinary charges against Bishop Rohrer under Chapter 20 (20.22.01.b; 20.22.02.c) with the full knowledge that such action could result in removal from the Office of Bishop and the removal from the ministry of Word and Sacrament of this church.

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## INTRODUCTION

The actions surrounding December 12, 2021 — the Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe — that were traumatic for the community of Misión Latina Luterana (the Community) in the Sierra Pacific Synod, were due not only to the mistakes, insensitivity, and errors in judgment of a few individuals, but at a deeper level, the actions were the result of a system of white power and institutional racism that exists throughout all expressions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

We are called as followers of Jesus Christ to speak the truth, knowing that the truth will set us free. We are called to speak truth to power, but also to speak the truth in love. Therefore, we offer this report as a truthful telling of an instance where racism was the primary factor in harming a community of people who love and seek to live by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as do we all. And we pray that accountability, which is one of the deepest forms of love, will flourish in new ways among us.

We believe that placing policies and procedures of a system of white power above communication and consultation with individuals and communities of color is a primary reason why the ELCA continues to be the [whitest denomination in the United States](#). Yet we pray that our ears and hearts can be open to the reality of how actions, meant to help, can actually damage and betray siblings, sisters, and brothers of color. It is our hope that the tragedy of that day will be not only a catalyst for repentance and reparations to the wounded Community and staff, but a wake-up call for the ELCA to address its institutional racism in humility and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

## ELCA LISTENING TEAM

On March 8, 2022, [ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton appointed a listening panel](#) of three people to review the interactions of Bishop Megan Rohrer with Misión Latina Luterana (the Community), particularly on December 12, the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and to make recommendations to Bishop Eaton to determine next steps. The panel was informed that they were not to revisit the decisions of the Sierra Pacific Synod regarding the case of former ELCA Pastor Nelson Rabell-González. Bishop Rohrer was invited to suggest one of the three members of the panel. Latiné leaders of the ELCA Latinx Lutheran Leadership (L3), the Estrategia Latina Committee of the ELCA, the Latiné DEMs and Churchwide staff leaders, board members of the Latino Ministries Association of the ELCA, and the Latiné Bishops of the Conference of Bishops [were invited to nominate a second member of the panel](#). A third person was appointed as the chair of the Team by the presiding bishop.

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## PRIMARY GOAL

The primary goal of the Team has been to interview individuals directly involved and affected by the actions (and their aftermath) of Bishop Megan Rohrer and the Sierra Pacific Synod Council in relationship to the Community's celebration of the Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe in Stockton, CA, on December 12, 2021. The Team was tasked to produce a report, based on interviews and comprehensive research, that seeks to accurately describe all the factors related to what happened leading up to that day, the day itself, and the aftermath. The Team will also make recommendations to the Sierra Pacific Synod, the ELCA, and Presiding Bishop Eaton for consideration and action.

## SECONDARY GOAL

In addition to its primary goal, the Team sought to identify aspects of institutional processes, and actions of individuals and groups that are rooted in a culture of white power. Often, these particulars are overlooked due to an acceptance of familiar patterns as being necessary, and reliance on guidance from trusted individuals in the system. It will benefit the work of the Gospel, as well as the mission and growth of the ELCA, for such aspects and actions to be seen and understood as counter to a professed stance of anti-racism.

## METHODOLOGY

The Team invited members of the Sierra Pacific Synod staff, including Bishop Megan Rohrer; representatives from the Synod Council; and members of the Community — including former ELCA Pastor Nelson Rabell-González — to provide a statement/testimonial related to the events of December 12, 2021. In an effort to balance opinions, we invited leaders from the ELCA Latiné Community, Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries and other groups and individuals with information relevant to the situation. In addition, in consultation with the Synod Vice President, we invited leaders and other individuals from the synod to be interviewed. It is important to note that the Team treated any testimonials, other than those from individuals who were present or directly related to the events of Dec. 12, as opinion only, focusing our primary effort on the people who were witnesses to what actually happened. It is important to note that a representative of the legal team of the Office of the Presiding Bishop advised that members of the Community should not be interviewed by the Listening Team. However, the Team believed that these interviews were at the heart of understanding the situation and not doing them would be in opposition to the mission of the ELCA.

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All interviewees were given three questions ahead of time:

1. How would you describe your relationship/role with the Sierra Pacific Synod? Please comment on your experience with the bishop, the staff, the Synod Council, and any awareness of the work and programs of the ELCA.
2. How did you receive information about the events of Dec. 12, 2021? What are your observations and opinions about the events of that day and its aftermath?
3. What thoughts can you share with us that you believe will be valuable in order for the Team to understand fully what happened and what can be done for the synod to move ahead in healthy ministry?

The time allocated for each testimonial was 30 minutes. In many instances, there was deep emotion expressed due to trauma experienced and/or feelings of pain and betrayal. Our listening sought to respect each testimonial and provide extra time in those instances, if needed.

**Note:** An independent professional translator was present at all the interviews with the Community members, to ensure accurate, deeper and full understanding.

## **PRECEDING THE 2021 SIERRA PACIFIC SYNOD ASSEMBLY**

### THE GATHERING AND RELOCATION OF A NEW COMMUNITY

Misión Latina Luterana (the Community) was formed as a partnership with St. Paul Lutheran Church in Lodi, CA. Pastor Mark Price was the Lead Pastor, and with Associate Pastor Nelson Rabell-González, formed the joint leadership for a congregation named St. Paul/San Pablo Lutheran Church. Originally a predominantly white congregation, it became a multiracial congregation, with more than 300 Spanish-speaking members.

In the spring of 2019, Pastor Price was made aware of allegations against Pastor Rabell-González. These allegations continued to escalate, culminating with Pastor Rabell-González' resignation from his call at St. Paul, in the spring of 2021.

Information from previous Bishop Mark Holmerud's administration of the Sierra Pacific Synod confirmed that the basis of Pastor Rabell-González's resignation from St. Paul

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was due to allegations of harassment and bullying. The Team did not receive further details or information about these alleged charges against Pastor Rabell-González.

However, members of the Community noticed that the timing of the escalation of the allegations and the resignation of Pastor Rabell-González from the St. Paul congregation coincided closely with the publication of [an article in the Los Angeles Times](#) in November of 2020. In this article, Pastor Rabell-González contributed and supported the notion that “Black Lives Matter protests in some towns meet with ‘scary’ backlash.” Opinions from others, as well as members of the Community, suggest that the escalation of the allegations and subsequent resignation of Pastor Rabell-González was prompted at least partially by the fears and discomfort of the predominantly white community. Some felt it was also prompted by Pastor Rabell-González’ increasingly active harangues.

The Team heard testimonials stating that the people of the Community were never officially informed of the resignation of Pastor Rabell-González, by the bishop’s office or the parish administration. It learned about it when a member of the Community — who was also a member of the Parish Council at St. Paul — was informed about the resignation. This negligence, which caused confusion and pain in the Community, represents a failure to communicate with the Community as a full partner in ministry.

In the spring of 2021, Pastor Rabell-González and the Community were relocated to a parish in Stockton, CA: Zion Lutheran Church. This new plan was not a partnership, but simply an arrangement for the Community to share worship space. Members of San Pablo (the Community) were left with a difficult decision to make: (a) follow their pastor — who helped increase the membership of their community to over 300 members in only a couple of years — or (b) stay under the roof of St. Paul, a building they had learned to call home.

Some members decided to follow Pastor Rabell-González and be part of the Community to be named Misión Latina Luterana in Stockton, CA. It then became a Synodically Authorized Worshiping Community (SAWC) — a move that saddened members of the community since it made them feel they had lost their status as a congregation. In a contract dated February 4, 2021, Pastor Rabell-González was named by the ELCA as the Mission Developer for the Community.

According to testimonial from the ELCA Churchwide Office, former Bishop Holmerud appointed an advisory panel to investigate these and further allegations against Pastor Rabell-González; the advisory panel concluded that there was sufficient evidence to

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initiate discipline. The recommendation for discipline was not acted upon by Bishop Holmerud but was passed along to Bishop Rohrer after the election.

## ISSUES SURFACED AT THE ASSEMBLY

Although the Team was tasked with the study of the December 12 events, it was evident that a series of actions, processes and decisions (before and after Bishop Rohrer's election and term) contributed to the harmful events on December 12.

As part of the bishop's election process of the Sierra Pacific Synod, all pre-identified candidates were asked to disclose allegations against them in a written form, as part of the pre-identification process. According to some testimonials, the Rev. Rabell-González, as a candidate for bishop, was asked to make a verbal disclosure of the allegations against him, during his five-minute speech to the Synod Assembly. Because Pastor Rabell-González didn't share the allegations in adequate detail according to Bishop Holmerud, the bishop made an additional and fuller disclosure to the assembly. On the contrary, the Rev. Megan Rohrer was not asked to verbally reveal *their* submitted written allegations describing the suit filed against Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church and its Pastor Megan Rohrer (*Superior Court of the State of California, County of San Francisco, [Case No CGC-18-567512](#): Brenda Moore et al., plaintiffs – v. – Megan Rohrer et al., defendants*) during any part of the bishop's election process. The entity in charge of recommending the disclosure of allegations – or not – for the assembly was the Nominations/Elections Committee, according to some testimonials. However, according to a "[Q&A Information from the Office of the Bishop](#)" article, published by the Sierra Pacific Synod, the Executive Committee was the entity in charge of recommending the disclosure of allegations.

During our desk research, the Team found that the Sierra Pacific Synod Council is not meeting its diversity membership requirements, as stated in its constitution. A lack of diversity in organizational structures at every level of the church (i.e., councils, committees, task forces) is a red flag that signifies the strong potential for inequitable procedures and decision-making. The likelihood of injustice is high when a predominantly (or entire) white group is in charge of decision-making for a person or community that differs from itself. This reality brings into question the fairness of ongoing relationships and decisions, including the long-term association with Pastor Rabell-González and the mistreatment of a Latiné community by white leaders.

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## FALL 2021

### CONTINUING CONFLICT AND DECISION PROCESS TO REMOVE PASTOR RABELL-GONZÁLES

The reader is invited to study [this article](#), published by the Sierra Pacific Synod on February 17 of 2022, related to the removal of Pastor Nelson Rabell-Gonzáles from service at Misión Latina Luterana, and his removal from the roster of the ELCA. Please be advised that some parties do not agree with the veracity of this report.

### THE COMMUNITY, RELOCATED AND RE-NAMED: MISIÓN LATINA LUTERANA, STOCKTON, CA

Members of the Community were frightened and discouraged by the need to leave St. Paul, which they considered “home.” Some left the church, and others chose to follow their pastor to a new home: Zion Lutheran Church in Stockton, CA. Bishop Mark Holmerud knew of the potential of the Stockton area for Latino ministry, having served as pastor at that congregation for almost 20 years, and the current pastor of the congregation agreed. The change in location was an effort to provide a new space for the Community, though at a distance from St. Paul. According to the Community, it was difficult for them to feel “at home” in their new space — especially considering that it was 45-minutes away from their previous home.

However, the Community began to grow again. December 12, 2021, was the first time, after two years, that the community had enough resources to truly celebrate their new home with an ambitious celebration of the Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe (the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe). This important feast day of the Church — specifically for Mexican Christians — is considered the most important day of the liturgical year in this community with deep Mexican roots. Mariachis, Aztec dance, carnitas, and other parts of the celebration had been in the planning stages for months, with the hope of finally being able to have a celebration at this new ministry site. The Community invited many friends and family members to participate in their lively and inclusive worship — a crucial evangelism strategy of the Community.



## THE FEAST OF THE LADY OF GUADALUPE: THE WITNESSES' ACCOUNT

DECEMBER 11

During a Synod Council meeting of the Sierra Pacific Synod on Saturday, Dec 11, 2021, the Council — in executive session — voted to vacate Pastor Rabell-González's call as a mission developer and terminate his employment. Eventually, in February 2022, Pastor Rabell-González was removed from the roster when Bishop Rohrer declined to endorse his application for "on-leave from call" status. The decision to vacate Pastor Rabell-González's call was an action that simultaneously ceased funding for the Community. Testimonials revealed that there are no plans to replace the pastor or continue to support the Community, effectively ending its viability.

A contradictory finding discovered by the Team is that while the action needed from the synod council was described as "urgent" by Bishop Rohrer and one other staff member of the Synod, leaders from the Synod Council described it as an action that was simply "important to avoid future harassment." Leaders also noted that the Synod Council was asked to vote on this action but was never informed of the planned implementation process.

This conversation and others took place — and plans were specifically described — two weeks before the plan was brought for vote to the Synod Council. Several staff members reported that during their regular staff meeting on Tuesday, November 30, they were informed by Bishop Rohrer that *they* had planned to bring this action item to the synod council on December 11 and implement the action on Sunday, December 12, during the [Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe](#).

Staff members also confirmed that Bishop Rohrer was repeatedly made aware of the potentially devastating effects of implementing that action on such an important day for this community. In addition, staff members reminded the Bishop how this Community had already suffered from an action by the synod when they were forced to abandon their home at St. Paul Lutheran Church, without previous communication or conversation.

According to testimonials of a number staff members, the Team observed that during the weeks leading up to the vote on December 11 (November 30 to December 11), there

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was a growing feeling of fearfulness and uncertainty, and a sense of unwelcomeness for any opinions apart from those of the Bishop. The fear was also allegedly created by previous and ongoing actions and comments from Pastor Rabell-Gonzáles.

The Team noted discrepancies between the information from an [official statement of the Sierra Pacific Synod Council](#) — which states that Pastor Rabell-Gonzáles informed Bishop Rohrer on a phone call on December 9, 2021, “*that he refused to fulfill the terms of his call*” — and the announcement made to the staff on November 30 (nine days before the alleged phone call). A text message from Bishop Rohrer, [shared with the Team](#) in which Pastor Rabell-Gonzáles was invited to a conversation over breakfast, on December 12 is important to note. The text message is dated December 9, indicating that the invitation to inform him of his removal was made before the vote took place by the synod council. Furthermore, the text message only makes reference to a conversation to set up the breakfast meeting, without any connection to Bishop Rohrer’s quote above. According to Pastor Rabell-Gonzáles, he believed this was an invitation for a consultation to try to find a way forward.

Another discrepancy worth mentioning was shared by Episcopal Church authorities. According to them, Bishop Rohrer advised them about the action taken by the synod council on Friday, December 10, and the plans for December 12 — a day before the actual vote took place. The Episcopal authorities also noted that they were warned by Bishop Rohrer that it was very possible that violence would take place at the worship service. Consequently, the authorities warned their priests and members to stay away from the celebration. It is interesting to the Team that, with this alleged threat of violence, Bishop Rohrer decided to bring additional staff members, both who were women of color, with *them* on December 12.

## THE EVENTS OF DECEMBER 12

Pastor Rabell-Gonzáles accepted the December 9 invitation for breakfast, and on the morning of December 12, he attended with his wife and Pastor [Curtis Smith](#), executive director of Faith in the Valley, a faith-based grassroots community organization supporting people impacted by equity issues, such as low-wage workers, young people, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated. According to Pastor Rabell-Gonzáles, he invited Pastor Smith as a witness, because he was afraid of potential false accusations by Bishop Rohrer. They met at a place called [Mimosas](#), in Stockton. Also in attendance, at the bishop’s request, were two staff members — Pastor Hazel Salazar-Davidson, Assistant to the Bishop for Authentic Diversity, Inclusive Community and Service; and Pastor Teresita Valeriano, Assistant to the Bishop and Director for Evangelical Mission

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and Service (DEM). These were two assistants whom Bishop Rohrer had instructed to accompany *them*, as well as be present at the worship service at 12:30 pm. Pastor Salazar-Davidson had been directed by the bishop to preach and lead worship.

According to several testimonials, Bishop Rohrer was allegedly wearing a bulletproof vest, since *they* had concerns about *their* safety and well-being during the meeting with Pastor Rabell-González, and during the worship service of the Community. Despite repeated statements threatening the safety of the staff, neither Pastor Salazar-Davidson nor Pastor Valeriano were advised to be similarly protected. Pastor Salazar-Davidson was in the chancel, preaching and leading worship. Pastor Valeriano sat in the back of the congregation. Bishop Rohrer also sat in the congregation. The Community, never having previously met *them* in person, did not know who *they* were until disruption began in the service and *they* moved to the front of the sanctuary.

A number of independent testimonials of the Community reported a racist verbal assault against a child of the Community by the Bishop before worship began. The Team interviewed the child, as well as adult witnesses. Bishop Rohrer threatened the child and the father of the child, who were in the Sacristy preparing the child for her role in leading worship. The bishop said loudly to both of them that *they* would “call the police” if the child and her father did not leave the Sacristy immediately.

For members of the Community, the threat of “calling the police” is an egregious action, especially when dealing with vulnerable communities of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC communities). It is especially fearful for communities who might include undocumented people, where “police” oftentimes includes U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

After this incident and the continuing confusion within the community related to the absence of their pastor, the long-awaited worship for the Lady of Guadalupe began. Along with the service of worship — now led by Pastor Salazar-Davidson — there began special liturgical music by a mariachi band and also the sacred Aztec dance and prayers, which were cut short as requested by the Bishop before the beginning of the service. Pastor Salazar-Davidson was front and center leading the service when the community started questioning, out loud, where their pastor was and what was happening with their celebration.

The Community was briefly informed that Pastor Rabell-González had been removed from his position as Mission Developer of this ministry and as their pastor. The community became agitated, wondering about the reasons that might have caused the removal during the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. According to testimonials, a mother

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from the congregation started questioning Bishop Rohrer about whether sexual misconduct was committed — she had a 19-year-old daughter who had spent several evenings with Pastor Rabell-González. Her fear and distress only grew when Bishop Rohrer refused to confirm that the allegations were not of a sexual nature, and refused to share more information.

Several members of the Community reported that the Bishop's facial expression shocked them and made them feel “small, attacked and humiliated.” They described it as a “smirk” which offended them. Advocates of the rights of persons with forms of neurodiversity note that such an expression on the face of an [autistic person](#) is often a response to the stress of a situation. It should be noted that the Team did not experience any such expression during the interview with Bishop Rohrer.

As a way to protect themselves, the Community took the image of *la Virgencita* and walked out of Zion's building, in effect also walking out of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Many members of the Community processed for 1.6 miles to a room in the building of a non-profit organization that had provided them assistance in the past.

The only piece of primary evidence regarding the events during the service of December 12, 2021 is a [video provided to the ELCA Listening Team](#). Several sections of this video are in Spanish. However, a translation service revealed to the Team that the Community — although it was feeling humiliated and heartbroken — did not attack, offend, or threaten Bishop Rohrer or *their* staff, as was claimed in several internal and public-facing communications by the Sierra Pacific Synod and Bishop Rohrer's publications, after the incident.

## AFTERMATH

On December 13, the Office of the Bishop in the Sierra Pacific Synod invited leaders from the synod to a Zoom meeting to discuss the events from the day before and decide what should happen next — failing again to consult the Community directly about issues important to its survival and care. A few members of the Community found out about the meeting and joined, eager to learn if the allegations were of a sexual nature. Bishop Rohrer again refused to confirm that the allegations were not related to sexual misconduct.

Although several bishops confirmed that during a disclosure meeting, it is advised not to reveal any details of the allegations of “misconduct,” or the names of victims, they also confirmed that what the allegations are *not* about could be shared, in order to reduce the

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anxiety of a congregation. The Community felt distress as a result of the Bishop's refusal, which left them in the dark as to whether their wives and daughters were safe or not. Testimonials from the Community stated that although Pastor Rabell-González had always been kind to them — and grew the Community by lively worship and events such as weekly vaccination clinics— they did not want a leader who might bully or put their families in danger. One of the members started calling Bishop Rohrer's actions evil — works of the devil — but did not threaten the Bishop in any way.

However, Bishop Rohrer reported that the community then threatened *them* and *their* staff. This was later denied by [staff members' testimonials](#). The Team requested evidence of these threats, but evidence has not been received as of the time of publication of this report.

Additional testimonies from the Latino Ministries Association of the ELCA, and from the Community, highlighted the [danger of portraying communities of color as violent or dangerous](#) — especially members of the Mexican community that have been portrayed as *rapists* or *criminals* by [previous administrations in the government](#).

According to a [statement](#) by Bishop Rohrer, pastoral care was provided to the Community before and after the events on December 12. The statement was then denied by the Community and a number of staff members of the Sierra Pacific Synod.

According to a number of testimonials, Bishop Rohrer's treatment of certain members of *their* staff created trauma for them in their positions. They reported feeling “a lack of agency” in their positions due to the bishop's refusal to accept their guidance about December 12 and other matters. The Bishop continually reminded the staff that *they* — the bishop — should make all the decisions and did not need consultation. Additionally, some staff members were extremely upset about being “forced” to receive communion from the bishop, after the community left the building on December 12 — which was perceived by them as a kind of spiritual abuse. Some believe that the bishop envisioned it as a comfort to them. However, they felt helpless to speak up about any of these matters due to the fear of losing their jobs.

## A COMMUNITY WITHOUT A HOME

Several testimonials described a feeling of “forced exile” from the ELCA due to the repeated actions against them by white leaders. The Community decided to change its name to Iglesia Luterana Santa María Peregrina – Holy Mary Pilgrim Lutheran Church — as a way to describe their experience of feeling assaulted and forced to become pilgrims yet again.

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Interestingly, members of this Community shared with the Team how proud they had felt of belonging to the ELCA when Bishop Rohrer was elected — they described this moment as an affirmation of the radical welcome of this denomination — a feeling shattered on December 12. It was difficult for the Team to see the tears and hear the laments of the Community members as they shared their distress of again being a ministry without a home. The Community is now worshipping in a parking lot and fears losing even more members because of this turmoil and the fact of having no indoor worship space.

According to testimonials including Bishop Rohrer, there was a sense of urgency — allegedly supported by the Office of the Presiding Bishop — to remove Pastor Rabell-González on December 12, to protect the Community. It is unclear to the Team why the Community was never contacted for a disclosure meeting if they are allegedly in danger by remaining under the care of their previous pastor.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

### THE USES AND MISUSES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Whether accurate or not, the public's perception is the reality an organization must face. The lack of communication regarding the Sierra Pacific Synod's actions on December 12, and its aftermath, have given opportunity for audiences — especially on social media — to create and own the ELCA's narrative. This is why the Team recommends the publication of this report, with redacted sensitive information to protect victims, in an effort to give the voices of the Community an opportunity to be heard. This will also be perceived as an effort by the ELCA Churchwide Office to be more transparent and open to a two-way dialogue with its members.

When there is space left by delay and inaction, it gets filled with misinformation and hate speech. An example of the seriousness of this problem is that the aforementioned and repeated categorization of the Community as violent is the kind of narrative that has led to [murders in the Latiné community in the United States](#). Immediate and transparent attention and accountability to situations of racial misconduct are strong statements of support for victims, and are crucial to validate anti-racist statements that have been publicized by the church.

On January 6, 2022, Presiding Bishop Eaton issued [an apology on behalf of the church to the Latiné community of the ELCA](#). The apology was distributed through the social

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media channels of the Latino Ministries Association of the ELCA. Soon afterward, members of several groups in the Latiné Community of the ELCA responded and shared feelings and concerns related to the situation, and to their perceived lack of accountability to counteract misinformation and address the particulars of the situation in the Sierra Pacific Synod.

## THE WIDER LATINÉ COMMUNITY IN THE ELCA

After sharing their perceived lack of ELCA accountability over racial misconduct, some BIPOC leaders and communities in our church have started to question their own participation in this church body. The [Latiné bishops from the ELCA Conference of Bishops have expressed their concerns](#) by sharing that "*the reverberations of this day [and the inaction that followed] have called into question the ELCA's capacity to faithfully engage communities of color in ministry, forced leaders of color across the nation to question their complicity within a system that continues to fall short of its public professions, and incapacitated the integrity of a church seeking to be newer, younger, and more diverse.*"

Members from the [Latino Ministries Association of the ELCA have also shared](#) with Presiding Bishop Eaton their concern regarding a lack of accountability regarding racist misconduct by ordained ministers of the ELCA. Several Latiné leaders and communities are questioning their participation in what they recognize as a racist system that ignores BIPOC communities. It was heartbreaking to hear stories of strong leaders contemplating a “prophetic exodus” from the ELCA, in solidarity with the one experienced by the Community, and to hear more stories of prejudice against BIPOC communities.

## COLLATERAL DAMAGE TO THE 2SLGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY

The Sierra Pacific Synod has long been a strong supporter of [2SLGBTQIA+](#) rights, and interviewees from the Synod and the Community spoke about the pride of electing the [first openly transgender bishop in the ELCA](#). Ongoing support for the bishop by many is strong within the territory of the synod as a way of upholding the critical need to stand against persecution of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

However, it was theorized to the Team, in several interviews, the belief that Bishop Rohrer has weaponized parts of *their* identity (as an autistic, 2SLGBTQIA+ individual) to defend *their* position and avoid being accountable for the alleged racist misconduct described above, against an entire BIPOC community.

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According to testimonials from interviewees who are leaders in the ELCA and the Latino Ministries Association of the ELCA, who identified as members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, there is a deep sadness. One person said: *“all the joy our church experienced with the installment of Bishop Rohrer, was then stolen from us by white supremacy.”* Furthermore, they reinforced the idea of accountability as a way to repair relationships, especially in a system rooted in rules and procedures that reinforce a patriarchal system.

## POTENTIAL RISK TO THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

The ELCA has shared its goal of engaging a million new, young, diverse people in the near future. However, the aforementioned lack of accountability over racist misconduct by rostered ministers in the ELCA has caused great lament, sadness, and mistrust across BIPOC communities in the organization. As stated by the Latino Ministries Association of the ELCA, “in a single day, the trust of an entire community of faithful Latiné Lutherans was lost, and in a single day, the ELCA lost an entire, vibrant community of young and diverse members.” It will be impossible to achieve such an ambitious goal of diversification without significant accountability and willingness to hear the voices of those who feel excluded, and then make meaningful changes in a system rooted in white power.

Diversity represents the greatest opportunity for growth in the ELCA: according to a [Public Religion Research Institute study in 2017](#), the majority of Hispanic and Latiné Americans are Christians (76 percent), and Latinés will also no longer be a minority by 2050, according to projections by the U.S. Census Bureau. Additionally, and according to [JPMorgan-Chase & Co](#), Latiné entrepreneurs will make up 29 percent of the U.S. population by 2050, up from 17 percent today. If Latiné-owned businesses grow as fast as the U.S. average, they would add \$1.4 trillion to the U.S. economy. Losing the trust of BIPOC communities over the lack of accountability, or over racist misconduct, is a loss of one of the greatest opportunities to slow down membership-declining trends in this denomination, and the opportunity to welcome new partners in the stewardship of the mission of the Gospel.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SIERRA PACIFIC SYNOD

### REPARATIONS FOR THE COMMUNITY

Now that the Community is no longer in the ELCA, due to actions of Synod Leadership and behaviors of a rostered ELCA pastor and bishop, there needs to be a way found to protect the Community and provide a home for its ministry. The provision of care and concern will also be a step in the right direction to repair relationships with the Latiné community in the ELCA. It will demonstrate an authentic commitment from the Sierra Pacific Synod to dismantle racism within its territory.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND TRANSPARENCY

The role and actions of the Synod Council have been identified as problematic by many who seek to understand the full picture of what happened on December 12. A detailed explanation of what the Synod Council could or could not do cannot be determined fully by outsiders. The Synod Council has stood firmly behind the actions of its bishop, yet [has produced an apology and explanation](#) for its actions. A deeper sense of regret and authentic apology could be accomplished by a broader publication of the [2022 Anti-Racism and Anti-Bias Benchmarks](#) and a commitment to report progress as goals are achieved.

Additionally, non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and lack of transparency are themes that were repeatedly brought to the attention of the Team. It is recommended that future disciplinary processes avoid signing NDAs and offer public information to the Sierra Pacific Synod members, while redacting any data that might endanger alleged victims.

### PUBLICIZE AND ENFORCE MEMBERSHIP DIVERSITY REQUIREMENTS FOR ALL SYNOD GROUPS

According to the testimonials offered by members of the Sierra Pacific Synod Council, this governing body is not meeting its diversity requirements as stated in their constitution (S10.01.A16.) However, the Team acknowledges that our denomination has

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not done all the intentional work required to support BIPOC leaders in our governing bodies. For this reason, it is recommended that the Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly enact legislation aiming to support BIPOC leaders within its organization, to help fulfill its diversity quotas in all their governing bodies, including committees, task forces, and similar groups.

Additionally, it is recommended that the highest governing body of the synod — its synod assembly — explore the reopening of processes that might have been affected by a potential lack of diversity members in its governance structure.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CHURCHWIDE EXPRESSION**

### **ASSIST IN REPARATIONS FOR THE COMMUNITY**

Due to the partnership between the Sierra Pacific Synod and the ELCA, in the creation of a SAWC and the call and placement of a Mission Developer, the Churchwide expression of the ELCA shares responsibility for the healing and health of the Community. Conversation with the leadership of the synod should lead to a joint resolution for next steps. This conversation should begin immediately.

### **PUBLICIZE A STATEMENT OF APOLOGY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

In addition to the sharing of information from the Team to the entire ELCA, there needs to be an authentic apology, and the promise of accountability from the Churchwide expression. Plans should be made and announced to broaden efforts to address the racism that was a factor in the tragedy of December 12. The ELCA did a thorough and effective job of providing study materials and forming a task force to guide conversations regarding sexuality. The same prioritizing and commitment could make a difference in addressing racism in all parts of the Church.

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## PLAN ONGOING ANTI-RACISM TRAINING FOR THE CHURCHWIDE STAFF, LUTHERAN CENTER AND THE CONFERENCE OF BISHOP

The work to dismantle racism begins at home. It is not enough to provide occasional speakers and seminars; there needs to be a commitment to prioritize the ongoing work of anti-racism internally, and in deepening personal conversation with those with whom we work. We recommend that a new independent organization be chosen for this training, in consultation with leaders related to justice issues on the Churchwide Staff and the BIPOC community, and that a long-term plan be developed for such work.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDING BISHOP**

#### A HEALING VISIT

In conversation with the Community, the Team experienced first-hand the suffering and trauma of this experience, but also a remarkable gift of grace and willingness to forgive. In fact, Pastor Rabell-González — according to testimonials from the Community — has exhorted them to forgive what happened to them and focus on the spread of the gospel and social justice for other struggling communities. The Community would still like to be part of the ELCA. All members spoke of the great freedom and peace of Lutheran theology. One strong leader, a woman who had been portrayed as a “troublemaker,” told us she rejoiced when Bishop Rohrer was elected, and bragged to her friends about how welcoming her new denomination is toward those who have been excluded. Sadly, she eventually was excluded by the very person whose election she had celebrated.

In an effort to demonstrate care for this Community, we invite Presiding Bishop Eaton and her team to visit, listen and be in contact with the remaining members of the community. Listening is the primary tool for the beginning of the healing of trauma, and a visit to the Community would do that, and also be a visible sign of accountability for all BIPOC people who often are not regarded as truly important members of the ELCA.

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Additionally, we are aware of the traumatic emotional and financial impact to Pastor Salazar-Davidson and we recommend consideration of reparations to her personally.

## CREATION OF A CRISIS MANAGEMENT ADVISORY TEAM

The worst mistake an organization can make, when dealing with a crisis, is not knowing it is dealing with a crisis. According to Susskind and Field (authors of *Dealing With an Angry Public: The Mutual Gains Approach*), "the advantages of full disclosure over an organizational crisis outweigh the disadvantages. [. . .] Disclosing information might save the public from further harm and protect an agency or a company from further liability."

Any healthy organization needs to have a Crisis Management Team available to provide support and advice to the organization's leaders — this is especially true for declining organizations, such as the ELCA. These Crisis Management Teams are usually formed by C-suite-level members with expertise in marketing, PR, communications, attorneys with expertise in the area of interest, community leaders from the affected public, pastoral care leaders, and more. According to Seeger and Sellnow, authors of "Communication in Times of Trouble," "*healthy confrontations within a legal team and a communications team are a good sign in any crisis management process.*" Having such a team available will be crucial for the future well-being of the institution, and a more responsive and less reactive decision-making process by leaders in our denomination.

## CREATION OF A TASK FORCE TO REVIEW POLICIES AND PROCEDURES OF THE ELCA

We believe it is of critical importance to create a diverse task force, with a specific timeline and assignment, to review the policies and procedures of the ELCA and make recommendations for changes. All across the country, voices are asking for such a review, and it would be in the best interest of the ELCA to be proactive in announcing a plan for such an effort.

ELCA policies have served us well for many years, and were instrumental in creating strong institutional support for victims of sexual misconduct. Yet, policies and procedures regarded as necessary for order in a white power system will inevitably contain parts that are oppressive and/or unjust for marginalized communities within



the denomination. Along with recommending needed change, the creation of this task force would be another example of accountability and support for communities of color.

## REVIEW OF DEFINITIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR DISCIPLINE

The [ELCA Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline of Rostered Ministers](#) fails to intentionally use the word “racism” as a conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office, and that it is grounds for discipline of rostered ministers. We recommend that racial misconduct be included in the revision of this document to specify behaviors that are harmful to persons and communities of color.

### RELEVANT SECTIONS OF “DEFINITIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR DISCIPLINE”

In addition to the testimonials and observations in the body of this document, the Team received comments about the following matters related to Megan Rohrer’s leadership as pastor and bishop:

- Poor judgment in high-stake situations
- Refusal to seek and accept counsel
- Refusal to accept personal blame — everything seen through the lens of the persecution of 2SLGBTQIA+ people

According to the [ELCA Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline of Rostered Ministers](#), conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office is grounds for discipline of rostered ministers. The grounds for discipline, noted below, describe actions of Bishop Megan Rohrer — as observed in the findings of this report — that are incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.

**Integrity:** Rostered ministers must be honest and forthright in their dealings with others. Dishonesty, deception, duplicity, or the manipulation of others for personal benefit or gain is conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.

**Professional attention to duties:** A rostered minister of this church has made commitments through ordination and through acceptance of a letter of call or appointment. Continued neglect of or indifference toward such commitments constitutes conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.

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**Hateful speech or actions:** A rostered minister's use of harassing, abusive, discriminatory, libelous, slanderous or hateful speech or actions, at any time, whether in person or on any form of social media, is conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.

**Abusive activity:** A rostered minister's physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual abuse of staff, colleagues, congregation members, or others is conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office. Such abuse could include, but is not limited to, bullying or harassment in written or verbal form, either in person or by remote communication.

Based on the facts and testimonials in this report, we recommend that the Presiding Bishop bring disciplinary charges against Bishop Rohrer under Chapter 20 (20.22.01.b; 20.22.02.c) with the full knowledge that such action could result in removal from the Office of Bishop and the removal from the ministry of Word and Sacrament of this church.

## CONCLUSION

Where do we go from here?

Racism is a sin. It is a subtle, strong bondage, rooted in centuries of the past and strengthened by fear and confusion. White determination to confess this sin and commit to an ongoing spiritual journey of learning and transformation is an essential step toward wholeness and healing, both for white people and people of color.

In the book "Can We Talk About Race?," author Beverly Tatum provides an image of the challenge we face. She visualizes the forward motion of racism as one of those moving walkways in an airport. A person who engages in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White Supremacy, and walks quickly along the walkway.

A person who behaves in passive or uninformed ways that are racist is like someone who is standing still on the walkway. No conscious effort is being made to walk toward racism, but the person is being carried along to the same destination.

Some people may become so distressed by the movement into active racism, that they choose to turn around and walk in the opposite direction. But unless they are walking more quickly than the speed of the walkway — unless they are very intentionally anti-racist — they will find themselves still carried along with the others.

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So we are called to walk quickly to act against the forward motion of racism. As we continue to face the hard work of understanding our bondage to the particular sin of racism, and seeking freedom from it for ourselves and all people, we are sustained and strengthened by our God whose power. . .

**“ ... at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”**

**Ephesians 3:20,21**  
**NRSV**

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

(20+) *European Descent Lutheran Association for Racial Justice* | Facebook. (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2022, from <https://www.facebook.com/EDLA4RJ/>

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EcoPreacher. (2022, March 31). *Remove Bishop Megan Rohrer? Follow the Pattern, Follow the Money.* EcoPreacher. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2022/03/remove-bishop-megan-rohrer-follow-pattern-follow-money/>





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