



# NOW IS THE TIME:

PARTICIPANT MATERIALS FOR ELCA STUDY GUIDE ON  
“EXPLANATION OF THE DECLARATION OF THE ELCA  
TO PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT”



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

## SESSION 1: NOW IS THE TIME FOR TRUTH-TELLING

### GROUP GUIDELINES

- Listen to each other's stories.
- Respect each person's journey.
- Be willing to share and grow.
- Speak only for yourself.
- Respect confidentiality.

### FOCUS ON PARAGRAPH 1 OF THE DECLARATION

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) apologizes to people of African descent for its historical complicity in slavery and its enduring legacy of racism in the United States and globally. We lament the white church's failure to work for the abolition of slavery and the perpetuation of racism in this church. We confess, repent and repudiate the times when this church has been silent in the face of racial injustice.

### BACKGROUND FOR DISCUSSION

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Each congregation engaged in this study is participating in the wider community of our church. Collectively we will learn and grow together as we enter into this study with one another. We enter with prayer, trusting the Spirit to lead us into places of new understanding, deeper humility and a commitment to the Beloved Community.

A myriad of feelings were named in the reading and hearing of the first paragraph of the declaration. For those who are white, some of those feelings may have been captured in questions raised in the explanation: Why must we look at slavery when it happened in the past? Why can't we just move on? Why am I part of this apology when I never owned slaves? For those who are white, it is important to sit with the questions and the feelings that arise with them, and to examine one's own stories in all their complexity in order to be open to new understanding.

For those who are white, it is not an easy journey to hear new truths and to hear and feel the pain and suffering people of African descent have endured for over 400 years. For people of African descent, it is painful and traumatic to feel and carry the weight and pain of history,



and feel and name the continuing daily realities of racism. Individually we have all entered into the story of the ELCA as a church and of the United States as a nation at different times and in different ways. Yet collectively, there are patterns and larger truths that unite us in a story whose legacy impacts all of us.

Hear the stories of **Dr. Joyce Caldwell** and **Pastor Ken Wheeler** as you reflect on your own story.

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### **Dr. Joyce Caldwell:**

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*I am white, of German heritage and fifth generation in the United States. I am a cisgender woman, retired from a career life in the church and higher education. I am a lifelong, baptized Lutheran. I am fully part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which has written and adopted this apology. Would it be easy for me to put this declaration on the shelf along with so many other statements and documents of the church? Yes. Would it be easy and convenient for me to live in the comfort and familiarity of my primarily white congregation and ignore my role within the larger society? Yes. Would it be easy to embrace the history of this nation and this church in the way I always heard and learned it, and to close my heart and mind to other perspectives? Yes. Would it be easy . . . ? Yes. But would it be true to the call of my baptism? It is there that the Spirit grabs me and challenges me to look at who I am within the wholeness of God's people.*

*There are so many questions I wrestle with. When I was a child growing up on a Midwestern dairy farm, my father would occasionally find an arrowhead in a field, and I wondered who the people were who had lived on*

*this land and what had happened to them. I did not ask enough questions, and if I had, I doubt that anyone was equipped to tell me about the peoples and nations that had lived there for centuries, and I would not have been told about the genocide and broken treaties and laws that removed them so my family could inherit land that was bought for a small amount through the Homestead Act.*

*As a naïve college student who grew up in a white, German-heritage community, I found my worldview shaken in college. As I sat on the floor of my freshman dorm and heard the life stories of African American classmates at my Lutheran college, I heard new truths and wondered how much I did not know. As I took African American literature courses and learned broader perspectives of history, I became aware of the smallness of the world in which I grew up and the narrowness of the lens through which I had been taught. And yet the pervasiveness of that white racial lens continues to invade and pervade my being.*

*I grew up in a church in which the stained-glass windows, artwork and Sunday school curriculum imaged Jesus and his followers as white. I heard*

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**IT IS THERE THAT THE SPIRIT GRABS ME AND CHALLENGES ME TO LOOK AT WHO I AM WITHIN THE WHOLENESS OF GOD'S PEOPLE.**

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*biblical interpretations that centered my whiteness (“the chosen people”) and demeaned people of African descent (who bear “the curse of Ham”). I heard stories of white missionaries who carried the story of Jesus to people in Africa and other parts of the world.*

*I grew up in a world in which the civilizers, the founders of the U.S. and anything important, the inventors, philosophers, artists, authors, teachers and everything in between were white. I encountered people of African descent at the farmers market when I accompanied my father to sell produce and chickens or, briefly, when we drove through the city or shopped, but my world was white, with white family, white friends and a white community. The history I learned was written*

*by white people. The primary images I saw in the media were of white people, and I heard jokes and stereotypes of people who were not white. I saw the world through a white racial frame that centered my existence, and I did not name myself as a member of a white group. People not like me were part of racial groups. I was simply an individual in a Eurocentric world.*

*I have grown and learned much since my early life, and my world has expanded to encompass a wide diversity of people, but I recognize that my early learning still lives within me. Old messages can rise up at any time and surprise me with their power and impact. I am continually unlearning, relearning and learning anew.*

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### **Pastor Ken Wheeler:**

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*Truth is the only option for me as a Black person who grew up in the late 1950s and '60s under the last vestiges of Jim Crow segregation. I saw this ugliness every day for the 17 years that I lived under that evil in Jackson, Miss. I saw how this ugliness touched both my father and my mother, and how they each reacted to it.*

*I remember being in a store with my father when I was about 10. My father was at the counter to pay for what I had purchased. The young white boy who may have been a couple of years older than me was at the register.*

*The young white boy did not address my father as “mister” or with any title of respect; instead, he called him “boy.” My father walked me out of the store, squeezing my hand.*

*And while my father did not say a word, the look on his face and him squeezing my hand spoke volumes.*

*Both my father and mother and uncles and aunts had heard this kind of white hostility all of their lives and they held it in. Day after day they held it in.*

*And what they held in was their anger.*

*My father would turn to drink as a way to deal with his anger and being daily humiliated by the violence that was implicit in this Southern apartheid. Sometimes, I would see him when he was in a stupor from his drunken state.*

*I had a front row seat to the personal toll that segregation took on Black families.*

*My childhood suffered because of what I saw. Not just the immorality of the posted signs in public places reminding us that our blackness made us inferior in the minds of white people but the internal psychological violence that happened as a result of being called a n\*\*\*\*\* by some white person who felt that they had a right to refer to you in that manner. Even now, when I hear that word, it does something to me. It affects*

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**I AM COMMITTED TO SPEAK – KNOWING THAT I SPEAK NOT JUST FOR MYSELF BUT FOR MY FATHER, HARRISON, AND MY MOTHER, EMMA.**

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*me in a deep way and in a deep place.*

*My parents did not speak. They took all of that humiliation in. They did not speak because they were concerned about me. They wanted to keep me safe because they knew what white rage could do.*

*I am committed to speak – knowing that I speak not just for myself but for my father, Harrison, and my mother, Emma.*

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As we work through this study, it is important to name and recognize how each of us has been shaped and formed. We do not need to be defensive about our individual and collective history, but we also cannot deny our history. We need to know that our history and all our experiences lie within us. They have shaped and formed us, but they do not need to define us. We can look at what we have been taught and examine and question it. We can identify what was missing from what we were taught, what was biased or misrepresented, and what was filled with stereotypes or messages of otherness. History is not a zero-sum game. We do not lose our individual story if we open ourselves to the stories of others. We do not disappear from history or lose relevance if history opens up to include all people. The truth of what we learned will shift and grow. There will be more nuances. There will be more pain. There will be discomfort and tears. But there will also be possibilities for new community and authentic relationships grounded in the truth of our collective stories.

For those who are white, it could be easy to walk away and to dismiss this apology and all it asks for, and to be able to do that simply because one is white in a predominantly white church. But it is precisely because the ELCA remains predominantly white in a society that is rapidly changing that no one in the ELCA can walk away. We need to ask why, in a society that is 60.1% White alone, not Hispanic or Latino,<sup>1</sup> ELCA church membership remains predominantly white. What have we missed as a church, living in isolation in so many places where our congregations are located? How have we been complicit in white flight, abandoning our urban churches as cities' racial demographics changed? How have we bought into stereotypes and images of ethnic European-descent Lutherans and African-descent people? How have we lived in the legacy of slavery and perpetuated systemic racism?



## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

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Use the following questions to guide your small group discussion, giving each person full group attention and an equal amount of time to share the learnings and experiences that have shaped their racial lens.

- Whose history did you learn in school or other settings? What was the perspective within that teaching and learning? Whose histories did you not learn?
- If you grew up in a church, who was pictured in images, and how were they portrayed? What stories and perspectives did you learn? How did that impact your racial lens?
- What is your earliest memory of noticing racial difference? What messages were associated with racial difference?
- What stereotypes of and messages about people of African descent and white people have you heard in your workplace, home, community or church, or in the media?

## VIEW THE VIDEO

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“The Danger of a Single Story” | [The Danger of a Single Story Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie TED Talks 2](#)

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

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- In the video Adichie says, “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person but to make it the definitive story of that person.”
  - What stories do you see or hear being told by teachers, friends, family, media, etc., that become the definitive story of a person or group?
  - What is the impact of the meaning of “difference” embedded in stories?
- Adichie also says, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories break the dignity of a people, but stories can also be used to repair that broken dignity.”
  - How have you seen her statement play out in stories you have heard?
  - How have stories shaped you and the way you see yourself and others?

## ASSIGNMENT AND JOURNALING

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1. Spend time keeping a journal of what you notice in the media, in conversations and within your community about the stories and experiences of white people and people of African descent. What stories are told, and by whom? What is the message within those stories?
2. Read the background information for Session 2.
3. Journal questions, feelings and reactions to the reading for the Session 2 discussion.



## SESSION 2: NOW IS THE TIME FOR UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING AND IMPACT OF SLAVERY

### GROUP GUIDELINES

- Listen to each other's stories.
- Respect each person's journey.
- Be willing to share and grow.
- Speak only for yourself.
- Respect confidentiality.

### FOCUS ON PARAGRAPH 2 OF THE DECLARATION

The ELCA acknowledges that slavery created and perpetuated racism, a truth this nation and this church have yet to fully embrace. The enslavement of Africans was based on a false narrative of the racial inferiority and the demonization of black people by the majority culture. Slavery was supported by white religious, legal, political, and scientific leaders and institutions for social, political, and economic gain. During the 246-year transatlantic slave trade, which began in 1619, an estimated 12 million people from Africa were stolen from their native lands, separated from their families, torn from their culture, killed for seeking freedom, tortured through inhumane forms of punishment, and subjected to lifetimes of captivity. While the white church stood silently by, people of African descent resisted through acts of rebellion, created new expressions of spirituality and Christian practice rooted in African traditions, and organized movements for freedom.

### BACKGROUND FOR DISCUSSION

Read together pages 4-5 in "Explanation of the Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent," on the question "Why look at slavery? It happened in the past." The following background provides additional information related to statements in paragraph 2 of the declaration.



*During the 246-year transatlantic slave trade, which began in 1619, an estimated 12 million people from Africa were stolen from their native lands, separated from their families, torn from their culture, killed for seeking freedom, tortured through inhumane forms of punishment, and subjected to lifetimes of captivity.*

Discussions of history are fraught with emotion and differing perspectives. The history conveyed through standard U.S. textbooks differs from the oral history, writings and memories of those who had significantly different experiences. The telling of the early history of the European colonies in North America and of the United States is “whitewashed” with patriotism and nostalgia rather than accuracy of facts. The period of enslavement of people of African descent is covered in brief references and made to appear as part of the past, with little attention to its legacy today.

As we address the accuracy of history, we should note that 1619, named in the apology, is the year enslaved Africans were first brought to the eastern shores of the current continental U.S., landing at Point Comfort (today’s Fort Monroe in Hampton, Va.). Yet enslaved Africans were brought to Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands more than 100 years earlier.<sup>2</sup> “It is estimated that the first African slave was brought to the region [of Puerto Rico] in 1513 by Portuguese traders,” with the numbers of the enslaved population rising from 2,000 to 15,000 between 1530 and 1560.<sup>3</sup> The history of slavery in the Caribbean and other parts of the Americas stretches beyond the parameters of this study guide and requires its own examination to deepen and expand the limited history explored here.

Within the current continental U.S., the institution of slavery covered a time period of 246 years, from 1619 to 1865. To grasp a perspective of that time frame and the relative recency of slavery, Isabelle Wilkerson points out in her book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* the “distant past” means that in the year 2022 the same number of years will have passed since 1865 as the number of years in the colonial time period from 1619 to 1776. Only in the year 2111 will the lands of the current U.S. have had as many years post-slavery as the 246 years of embracing slavery.<sup>4</sup>

Avoidance of inconvenient facts and denial of history is deeply rooted in the dominant power structures that provided social, political and economic benefit to people of European descent, who lost their ethnic identity as they entered the lands of the U.S. and became “white” – an identity created as distinct from people of African descent whose darker skin resulted in a denial of freedom that was promised for “all” in the Declaration of Independence. Stories of enslaved people do not speak of rights or the pursuit of happiness. They speak of a world of slave markets, torture, beatings, rape, family separation, dehumanization and brutal death. Enslaved people come to life through slave narratives and standing in places where they lived and breathed. In his book *How the Word Is Passed*, Clint Smith challenges readers to experience and feel the reality of slavery rather than hold slavery in abstract terms. “[White people] do not hear the fear, or the laughter. They do not consider that these were children like their own, or that these were people who had birthdays and weddings and funerals, who loved and celebrated one another just as they loved and celebrated their loved ones.”<sup>5</sup>

*Slavery was supported by white religious, legal, political, and scientific leaders and institutions for social, political, and economic gain.*

Slavery became embedded within the social, political and economic life of the colonial U.S. from its very beginning. It is regularly referred to as America's "original sin" because the colonial state and the church were intertwined in subjugating a group of people to be bought and sold as property. The timeline on page 4 of the explanation outlines key dates of the 1600s when slavery was created and reinforced as an ironclad system. The role of the Christian church in undergirding this system is exemplified by the 1667 act passed in the colony of Virginia that decreed, "The conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage."<sup>6</sup> This act stood to counteract the longstanding British policy that forbade Christians from enslavement of one another as spiritual brothers and sisters. As enslaved people began to respond to the Christian message of missionaries and converted to Christianity, enslaving colonists became fearful that baptism could lead to freedom, and they resisted missionary efforts to introduce Christianity to enslaved people.

The new law in Virginia was followed by similar laws in New York and Maryland, separating soul and body. White enslavers were "encouraged to evangelize their human chattel since baptized slaves would not be freed,"<sup>7</sup> thereby securing property rights of slaveholders and ensuring mastery over the bodies of the enslaved to support an economy that was becoming more and more dependent on enslaved labor. This law was part of the complex groundwork to establish a permanent, hereditary status of enslavement that was tied to race and which was further

supported by biblical arguments created for the defense and justification of buying and selling of human beings.

The entanglement of Christianity with exploitation, oppression and enslavement dates back to the Papal Bulls of the 1400s that gave European Christian explorers the right to claim for their monarchs the lands they "discovered" that were not inhabited by Christians.<sup>8</sup> "Pagan" inhabitants could be enslaved or killed. The process of creating native peoples and people of African descent as "pagan" and "other" laid the foundation for the construction of the concept of race and a hierarchy that established people of European descent as superior and people of African descent as most inferior. With the establishment of superiority and inferiority, enslavement could be rationalized and enslaved people could be used by white people to build universities, churches, capitol buildings and an entire economic system to create wealth for white people on the backs of people of African descent throughout both the North and the South of the United States.

*The enslavement of Africans was based on a false narrative of the racial inferiority and the demonization of black people by the majority culture.*

The complexity of U.S. history is exemplified in the life and writings of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was primary author of the Declaration of Independence, which declares "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Yet in *Notes on the State of Virginia* Jefferson, wrote that "the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind."<sup>9</sup>

At times Jefferson advocated for the abolition of slavery, yet he remained a slave holder, buying and selling people as needed to serve his economic interests. He recorded the births and deaths of enslaved people in his farm book, including the births of six children he is known to have fathered with an enslaved woman, Sally Hemings. Jefferson freed two of the four surviving children during his lifetime and freed the remaining two in his will. He never freed Sally Hemings.<sup>10</sup>

For all the economic gain of slavery and his reliance on that gain, Jefferson was also aware of the moral and human cost for those who perpetuated slavery and gained from it:

There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. ... The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to the worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances. And with what execrations should the statesman be loaded, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the amor patriæ of the other.<sup>11</sup>

Jefferson and George Washington are among 12 of the first 18 U.S. presidents who were slaveholders at some point.

*While the white church stood silently by, people of African descent resisted through acts of rebellion, created new expressions of spirituality and Christian practice rooted in African traditions, and organized movements for freedom.*

Read page 8 in “Explanation of the Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent,” on the question “What is the history of people of African descent in resilience and resistance?”

While white-dominant society has ignored, overlooked and discounted the lives and contributions of people of African descent, the white church has followed a parallel path in ignoring and discounting the contributions of the Black church and Black theology. In *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism*, Drew G.I. Hart notes:

Despite four hundred years of assault, black faith and resistance has resulted in creative affirmations for our humanity, culture, and creativity. We have dared to love one another and to reject the dominant myths of our country. For centuries we have risked loving one another through mutual social and economic support. What is most amazing about our history is that, over and over again, black people have frequently not turned toward violent revolt. Such actions would seem to be reasonable responses to four hundred years of oppression. Instead, black people have primarily chosen to pursue love, justice, restoration, and healing.<sup>12</sup>

In *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity*



*in Racism*, Jemar Tisby writes, “Part of the pernicious effects of white supremacy in the church has been the devaluing of black theology—the biblical teachings that arise from and are informed by the experience of racial suffering, oppression, and perseverance by black people in America.”<sup>13</sup> He notes that “the American church can learn from the black church what it means to lament . . . but how to rejoice as well.”<sup>14</sup> Black Christians provide both spiritual

songs of lamentation and vocal and bodily testimony to God’s goodness as they engage their full selves in worship. “Black people have somehow found a way to flourish because of faith. It is a faith that is vibrant and still inspires black Christians to endure and struggle against present-day forms of racism. The entire church can learn from believers who have suffered yet still hold onto God’s unchanging hand.”<sup>15</sup>

### **SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

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- What have you heard and learned of slavery in the past? What has been new to you?
- What feelings and reactions did you notice as you read the material for this week? Do you have reflections you would like to share from your journal?
- In his research, Smith writes: “Jefferson knew that slavery degraded the humanity of those who perpetuated its existence because it necessitated the subjugation of another human being; at the same time, he believed that Black people were an inferior class.”<sup>16</sup> How does this statement have meaning today as a legacy of slavery?

### **VIEW THE VIDEO**

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**"Repairing the Breach: The Episcopal Church and Slavery Atonement"**

### **SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

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- How do you process the paradox of “slavery was terrible, but I didn’t do it” alongside the lasting impact and meaning of the legacy of slavery on both white people and people of African descent, and the church’s complicity in slavery?
- What shift might happen within us when we face history and listen with an open heart, not out of guilt but out of grief?

## ASSIGNMENT AND JOURNALING

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1. Watch a movie or documentary and note your feelings and reactions in your journal:
  - Katrina C. Browne’s documentary *Traces of the Trade: A Story From the Deep North*.
  - Steve McQueen’s drama *12 Years a Slave* (IMDb TV or Amazon Prime Video).
  - Kasi Lemmons’ drama *Harriet* (IMDb TV or Amazon Prime Video).
  - Barry Jenkins’ dramatic series *The Underground Railroad* (Amazon Prime Video).
2. Read the background information for Session 3.
3. Record questions, feelings and reactions to the reading for the Session 3 discussion.



## SESSION 3: NOW IS THE TIME FOR EXAMINING SYSTEMIC RACISM

### GROUP GUIDELINES

- Listen to each other's stories.
- Respect each person's journey.
- Be willing to share and grow.
- Speak only for yourself.
- Respect confidentiality.

### FOCUS ON PARAGRAPH 3 OF THE DECLARATION

The ELCA teaches that racism is sin and that racism denies the reconciling work of the cross. Rooted in slavery, racism is manifested through the history of Jim Crow policies, racial segregation, the terror of lynching, extrajudicial killings by law enforcement, and the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. Descendants of formerly enslaved Africans are still denied equal access and opportunity in church and society while white people collectively benefit from unequal access, opportunity, and power. Institutional racism currently exists in the ELCA through discriminatory treatment within the call process; inequitable compensation of clergy of color; racial segregation; divestment from black communities and congregations; systemic policies and organizational practices; and failure to fully include the gifts of leadership and worship styles of people of African descent.

### BACKGROUND FOR DISCUSSION

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Read pages 5-6 in "Explanation of the Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent," on the question "Slavery is over, so why can't we just move on?" The following background material provides additional explanation to understand racism as structural and a holistic system.

Pages 5-6 in the explanation give a brief insight into the meaning of systemic racism as it highlights some of the impacts of racism, including incarceration, stereotypes, negative media images, laws that limited the freedom of people of African descent and that forced separation

of Blacks and whites, and enforcement of social, political and economic oppression through terrorism and lynching. This short list of examples illustrates the breadth, depth and complexity of racism as a system that touches all areas of life.

Resistance to conversations on racism are at times lodged in an understanding of racism as individual attitudes and actions, which can include use of racial epithets, conscious or unconscious biases and stereotypes, and individual actions that hurt or harm a person directly or limit their chances in life. When something is called out as racist, there can be resistance and denial from white people because they are locked into this perspective of racism on an individual level and a desire to see oneself apart from a larger system.

Racism, however, is systemic. It is rooted in ideologies of racial superiority and inferiority that were supported by teachings and rulings of the church, woven into the U.S. Constitution in the Fugitive Slave Clause and the “three-fifths compromise” by which those of African descent counted as three-fifths of a person, enacted in a system of enslavement that positioned people as property, and perpetuated in laws, policies and practices that limited the freedoms, possibilities and opportunities of people of African descent.

As a system that permeates all areas of life, racism operates at the individual, cultural and institutional levels. It can involve the hateful or prejudiced actions and attitudes of individuals, but it takes more insidious forms at the cultural and institutional levels as it defines whiteness as the norm for values, standards of beauty, societal expectations for interaction and communication, and ways of thinking, seeing and being in the world. Cultural racism is reflected in whose stories permeate the telling of history; whose

literature, art and music are defined in terms of classics; whose holidays are central to the calendar; and whose images are most often associated with leadership, success and civilizers of society.

Over time those cultural norms and standards have been baked into U.S. institutions through laws, policies and practices. Although certain racist laws have been overturned, they have left a legacy of lingering attitudes and perspectives. In 1857, the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision declared that African Americans could never be citizens of the United States. In 1896, Plessy v. Ferguson established legal precedent for racial segregation and undergirded Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation. In 1954, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka declared racial segregation in schools unconstitutional, yet new avenues for racial segregation emerged in private schools, white flight, redlining and racial housing covenants.<sup>17</sup> Racism was further perpetuated through institutions of business and employment, government, religion, health services, transportation, media, and banking and finance. Steps forward with the civil rights movement were met with the New Jim Crow of drug laws and mass incarceration.<sup>18</sup> The progress made through the Voting Rights Act of 1965 is being met with new, restrictive voting laws.





The 1993 ELCA social statement *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* defines racism as a mix of power, privilege and prejudice.<sup>19</sup> If this definition is linked to the aforementioned levels of oppression, it can be illustrated as individual (prejudice) + cultural (privilege) + institutional (power). These three levels are interwoven and inseparable. They act together as a system, based on race, that limits the possibilities, opportunities and life

chances for people of African descent – and all people of color. People may act individually to hurt or harm people of color in particular ways and in particular circumstances, but the larger harm is inflicted through an integrated system created over 400 years that positioned people of African descent as inferior and provided the laws and social means to create a caste system that has limited the full engagement and access to “respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt, and human kindness . . . [based on] their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy.”<sup>20</sup>

In 2015, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) recognized the sin of racism within its member churches, calling out the actions of Dylann Roof when he shot and killed nine African American people during a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. The LWF’s public statement in response to these killings argued, “We can and must confess that racism is a structural sin that exists in our churches and communities, and commit ourselves to difficult conversations about the sin of racism and advocacy to overcome it.”<sup>21</sup>

### **SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

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-  Share questions, feelings or reactions from your journaling on the background material for this week.
-  Discuss your understanding of racism compared to the definition presented.
-  Share examples of how systemic racism denies people of African descent equal access and opportunity in society.
-  Re-read the last sentence in paragraph 3 of the declaration, which gives examples of institutional racism in the ELCA. What specific instances or personal experiences can you give that illuminate this list of examples?

### **VIEW THE VIDEO**

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“**What Is Systemic Racism in America?**“



## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

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- Based on the video and the prior discussion, how do you see and understand racism as baked into the pie of the United States?
- The video highlights disparities between Ebony and Emily in health care, education, employment and earnings. What specific examples can you give of the impact of racism on people of African descent and other people of color in your community, larger surrounding area, or state?
- How does the long history of classifying Blacks as inferior continue to impact current U.S. policies and events?
- In the video, Ijeoma Oluo says, “You may have played a role even if you have the best intention.” How do you react to that statement and its implication for how we participate within larger systems?



## ASSIGNMENT AND JOURNALING

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1. Watch a movie or documentary and note your feelings and reactions in your journal:
  - Ava DuVernay’s documentary *13th* (Netflix).
  - Sam Pollard’s documentary *Slavery by Another Name* (PBS).
  - DuVernay’s historical drama *Selma* (IMDb or Amazon Prime Video).
  - Stanley Nelson’s documentary *Freedom Riders* (PBS).
2. Reflect on your community or congregation. What examples do you see of the legacy of systemic racism? Who lives in your community? Why? What is the local history related to U.S. land settlement, the G.I. Bill, redlining, white flight, etc.?
3. Read the following two articles and come prepared to share how your experiences compare with the authors’ examples of privileges related to being white, indicating items that are also true in your life.
  - Peggy McIntosh, “**White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack**,” National Seed Project, 1989.
  - Yolanda Denson-Byers and Shari Seifert, “**Unpacking White Privilege**,” *Living Lutheran*, January 2020.
4. Read the background information for Session 4.
5. Journal questions, feelings and reactions to the reading for the Session 4 discussion.

## SESSION 4: NOW IS THE TIME FOR REALIZING AND OWNING WHITE SUPREMACY WITHIN THE ELCA

### GROUP GUIDELINES

- Listen to each other's stories.
- Respect each person's journey.
- Be willing to share and grow.
- Speak only for yourself.
- Respect confidentiality.

### FOCUS ON PARAGRAPH 3, SENTENCE 3 OF THE DECLARATION

Descendants of formerly enslaved Africans are still denied equal access and opportunity in church and society while white people collectively benefit from unequal access, opportunity, and power.

### BACKGROUND FOR DISCUSSION

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Read pages 6-7 in "Explanation of the Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent," on the question "Slavery ended over 150 years ago, and I am a white Lutheran who never owned slaves. How and why am I a part of this apology?"

In focusing on the benefits of being white in the U.S., it is important to acknowledge that everyone has multiple identities. Socioeconomic class, age, education level, gender identity, sexual identity, physical or mental ability, ethnicity, immigrant experience, religious background, employment and other identities all impact individual experience. Each identity carries its own set of disadvantages and related privileges. Having few financial resources, not having someone who can open doors for employment, being a single parent, and many other individual realities can blur any perception of white privilege. As Ijeoma Oluo notes in the video in Session 3, all those things are barriers; however, a white person facing any of many different barriers does not face the additional barrier of skin color. Racism as a system of structural advantage positions white people differently from people of African descent. The unearned privileges run deep and are structured to be invisible.





In *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, Gary Howard addresses the privilege of being able to ignore and discount the reality and meaning of white privilege:

Many privileges have come to Whites simply because we are members of the dominant group: the privilege of having our voices heard, of not having to explain or defend our legitimate citizenship or identity, of seeing our images projected in a positive light, of remaining insulated from other people's realities, of being represented in positions of power, and of being able to tell our own stories. These privileges are usually not earned and often not consciously acknowledged. That our privileged dominance often threatens the physical and cultural well being of other groups is a reality that Whites, for the most part, have chosen to ignore. The fact that we can choose to ignore such realities is perhaps our most insidious privilege.<sup>22</sup>

The structural advantage of privilege for white people in the U.S. was constructed over the course of the nation's history and embedded in the systems of racism identified in Session 3. Those systems work to create a particular lens through which white people view events. Laws of exclusion for people of color are largely invisible to people who are white, whereas laws providing access and opportunity, such as the G.I. Bill and FHA loans, which are written primarily to benefit white people, carry the illusion that they are available to all. Policies and practices and attitudes and actions that are woven into all levels and institutions of U.S. society negatively impact the daily lives of people of color but remain largely invisible to white people.

### **SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

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-  Focus on one of your identities. In what way(s) have you experienced disadvantage because of that identity?
-  Select another of your identities. In what way(s) have you experienced unearned advantage because of that identity?
-  What surprised you and/or what new meaning or understanding did you come to as you heard the impact of unearned disadvantages based on particular identities?
-  What are the challenges to seeing and recognizing unearned advantage in any of our identities?

## BACKGROUND ON AUTHORS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE ARTICLES

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### *Peggy McIntosh*

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Peggy McIntosh began investigating white privilege in her life by focusing on privileges that men experience relative to her experience as a woman. She noted that men readily acknowledged the disadvantages of women but did not speak about their over-advantage or privilege. As she recognized her different identities, she wondered about the meaning of her identity as a white person. If, as a white person, she could see the disadvantages of people of color, could she, like men relative to women, be unaware of her over-advantages or privileges as a white person?

McIntosh introduced her list of advantages in the ground-breaking article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” noting these privileges as particular to her experience:

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions which I think in my case *attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege* than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions.<sup>23</sup>

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### *Yolanda Denson-Byers*

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Yolanda Denson-Byers notes that she grounded her university course “Race in America” in McIntosh’s article and began to wonder if she could apply the concepts “to help my European American siblings within the church understand the intrinsic privileges that come with being white and Lutheran in America.”<sup>24</sup> She developed a list of those privileges in three ways: (1) “by brainstorming all the white privileges I could think of that my European American siblings were enjoying in the church but I was not”; (2) by collecting privileges from “a group of women of color in the ELCA”; and (3) by adding to the privileges as they were identified by an adult education group at Calvary Lutheran Church in Minneapolis.<sup>25</sup>

## **SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

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-  What feelings do you have about the items on the two lists that are true for yourself?
-  What surprised you the most in the items listed? What surprised you the least?
-  As you reflect on these lists, can you explain how white privilege has touched your life and shaped your journey?
-  What meaning does Denson-Byers' list have for ELCA congregations and their members?
-  What have you learned by examining white privilege?




## **VIEW THE VIDEO**

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**“Understanding My Privilege”**

## **SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

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-  What images or examples stood out for you in this video?
-  What curiosities do you have about white privilege in your own life?
-  The U.S. is often described as a country of equal opportunity for all. Many churches declare “all are welcome.” Based on the examination of systemic racism and the discussions in this session, how do you react to the following statement from the declaration with which this session began?

Descendants of formerly enslaved Africans are still denied equal access and opportunity in church and society while white people collectively benefit from unequal access, opportunity, and power.

## ASSIGNMENT AND JOURNALING

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1. Be observant throughout the week. As you watch the news, read articles, watch a movie, listen to conversations, etc., note examples of white privilege. List the examples you notice in your journal.
2. Read the background information for Session 5.
3. Journal questions, feelings and reactions to the reading for the Session 5 discussion.
4. Go to the ELCA Advocacy page to sign up for [ELCA Advocacy Alerts](#).



## SESSION 5: NOW IS THE TIME FOR RACIAL JUSTICE, RECONCILIATION AND REPARATIONS

### GROUP GUIDELINES

- Listen to each other's stories.
- Respect each person's journey.
- Be willing to share and grow.
- Speak only for yourself.
- Respect confidentiality.

### FOCUS ON THE CLOSING PARAGRAPH OF THE DECLARATION

The ELCA trusts that repentance begins and ends with the work of a gracious God. In prayerful response to the African Descent Lutheran Association's request for an apology, this church enters into a season of confession and lamentation. Beyond empty promises or well-meaning intentions, this church recommits to the work of racial justice, socioeconomic equity, and racial reconciliation. This apology is a recommitment to the process of right and equitable relations within this church, and the flourishing of Christ's church universal. This recommitment means working toward a deeper understanding of slavery and its legacy, of institutional and structural racism, of white privilege, and of attitudes and foundations of white supremacy. It means praying for the renewal of this church as disciples of the living Christ.

### BACKGROUND FOR DISCUSSION

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Read page 9 in "Explanation of the Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent," on the question "Where do we go from here as a church?"

This study guide provides a toe in the water in examining the meaning and depth of 400-plus years of normalizing whiteness as superior and casting blackness as inferior. Since the first people of African descent arrived on the shores of what would become the United States,



this value system has meant different lived experiences and life chances for people of European and African descent. It has meant the difference between being able to be oblivious to and discount the meaning and impact of racism and being regularly confronted with demeaning comments, acts of discrimination and systems of oppression.

In his article “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Nehisi Coates writes: “Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.”<sup>26</sup>

He goes on to write:

The lives of black Americans are better than they were half a century ago. The humiliation of WHITES ONLY signs are gone. Rates of black poverty have decreased. Black teen-pregnancy rates are at record lows—and the gap between black and white teen-pregnancy rates has shrunk significantly. But such progress rests on a shaky foundation, and fault lines are everywhere. The income gap between black and white households is roughly the same today as it was in 1970. Patrick Sharkey, a sociologist at New York University, studied children born from 1955 through 1970 and found that 4 percent of whites and 62 percent of blacks across America had been raised in poor neighborhoods. A generation later, the same study showed, virtually nothing had changed. And whereas whites born into affluent neighborhoods tended to remain in affluent neighborhoods, blacks tended to fall out of them.<sup>27</sup>

This study guide has provided a lens to begin to discover the meaning of the legacy of

slavery and subsequent systemic racism. The context for this apology was put in place in early colonial history through laws that defined one’s life chances through the institution of slavery. It was embedded in the U.S. Constitution and maintained through years of Jim Crow laws, voting rights restrictions, and education and housing segregation. And it was cemented in the creation of a mindset that Black people are more dangerous than other people.<sup>28</sup> The current moment in time stands on the accumulation of many, many moments of decisions and actions, held in place by emotions.

Because people of African and European descent largely lived in separate communities, they also worshiped in separate congregations. Predecessor bodies of the ELCA were established by people of Northern European heritage and maintained white, Western, Northern European cultural values, norms and practices. Congregations grew up within segregated communities shaped by redlining and restrictive covenants that began in the 1930s. Those housing patterns and supporting laws provided the foundation for the creation of segregated suburbs in the 1950s.<sup>29</sup> As white people left cities to move to the suburbs, they generally took their congregations with them. Coates notes, “White flight was not an accident—it was a triumph of racist social engineering.”<sup>30</sup>

The declaration states, “We lament the white church’s failure to work for the abolition of slavery and the perpetuation of racism in this church. We confess, repent and repudiate the times when this church has been silent in the face of racial injustice” (paragraph 1). It goes on to state that “this church enters into a season of confession and lamentation” (paragraph 4).

For some, confession and repentance are difficult. We may hope to distance ourselves from the history of enslavement even as we may cling to the earlier history of our nation's founding. We may count our history within the U.S. in years post slavery while ignoring 246 years of enslavement. We may find it difficult and painful to look fully into the face of the realities of slavery, yet our congregations, schools, communities, employment opportunities, wealth patterns, and health care and criminal justice systems have been formed and shaped by a society that valued whiteness and denigrated blackness. It may feel easier to discount that history and reality and to turn away from it, but healing comes from lamentation and confession. "The ELCA trusts that repentance begins and ends with the work of a gracious God" (paragraph 4).

"Enter[ing] into a season of confession and lamentation" as church moves us from defining ourselves as individuals to recognizing our identity as part of a group. The concept of individualism lies at the core of white ways of thinking and being. White people see themselves as individuals while categorizing people who are not white within groups. There is often resistance to seeing and recognizing racism as a system that structurally benefits whites as a group while structurally disadvantaging people of color, based on group membership. White people strive to see themselves as individuals who have made it on their own, without recognizing the collective system that enables possibilities and opportunities.

The paradigm shift from individual to corporate lies at the heart of the church's corporate confession and lamentation. It is a recognition that, whether or not I have done something individually, I am caught up in a system that, for 400 years, has given benefits

to people with white skin at the expense of people with Black and Brown skin.

The mindset of individualism impacts not only our confession but also our response. As individuals, white church members often respond with charity and volunteer work, reaching out from a distance to help people one by one in ways that they perceive people of color need help. The focus, through a paternalistic lens, is on changing individual lives rather than addressing structural inequality. Working to change systems requires seeing and acting on a corporate level. It means being in solidarity across any and all divisions to "work [for] racial justice, socioeconomic equity, and racial reconciliation" (paragraph 4). The hard work requires humility and openness for white people to acknowledge where systemic advantage exists in order to forge authentic relationships and join the work for structural change to build up the whole body of Christ.



## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

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- How do you hold and feel the weight of this apology? What do you lament?
- What does it mean to you to see yourself as part of a group and to engage in corporate confession and lamentation? What does it mean for the life of the church?
- How can your congregation engage in a corporate action to address a structural issue of racism within your community – or congregation?

## VIEW THE VIDEO

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“[Nikole Hannah-Jones on the Case for Reparations](#)”

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

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- Hannah-Jones states that anti-blackness is a very real phenomenon in the U.S. What are your reactions to that statement? How have you seen anti-blackness lived out in the past or present?
- In talking about reparations, she also states that white Americans feel guilty and see reparations as a form of punishment. How do you see and understand the case for reparations?

## LOOKING AHEAD

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- Identify at least one person with whom you will share what you have learned and can engage in continuing conversations about race.
- Identify one action you will take and a person to whom you will be accountable for that action.
- Sign up for [ELCA Advocacy Alerts](#) to join with others in taking action.
- Continue to learn about reparations.

## GLOSSARY

**ANTI-RACISM** | The work of actively opposing racism through ongoing self-awareness and self-reflection that understands, names and exposes systems of racism, and of advocating for social, political and economic changes that bring equity.

**CHattel SLAVERY** | A system of enslaving and owning a human being as property. In the system of chattel slavery, the enslaved person can be bought, sold and permanently owned as property, with no voice or agency for one's life. Chattel slavery is generational: the slave's offspring are automatically enslaved and subject to being bought, sold, given or inherited.

**EQUITY** | A sense that people have different needs based on their circumstances and therefore need different allocation of resources and opportunities to reach an equal outcome. Equality provides the same for everyone; equity provides according to different needs.

**IMPLICIT BIAS** | Attitudes or stereotypes that are held unconsciously and that impact actions, interactions, perceptions and decisions.

**JIM CROW** | Laws and practices that were enacted primarily in the southern United States following Reconstruction and that governed social, political and economic life into the mid-20th century. Jim Crow enforced racial segregation and discrimination that limited the life chances of Black Americans.

**OPPRESSION** | A state of prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or control, characterized by enslavement, exploitation, abuse or ongoing injustice, that denies freedom and opportunities to people or socially defined groups.

**PREJUDICE** | A set of generalized negative beliefs about a whole group of people.

**PRIVILEGE** | Circumstance in which individuals have greater access to or availability of resources because of membership in the dominant group. The dominant group's way of thinking and living is seen as the norm against which all others are compared. Life is structured around those norms for the benefit of the dominant group. White people are the dominant group who receive privilege in the system of racism, based on the color of their skin.

**REPARATIONS** | Actions taken to repair or make amends for a wrong or injury. Reparations can be money or some other type of compensation, payable by a defeated nation to a victorious one or to individuals for war-related loss. Reparations to people of African descent are compensation for the historical wrongs done in the United States to people of African descent.

**SOCIAL POWER** | Access to and availability of resources that enhance one's life chances, and the ability to get what one wants and influence decisions and people. The dominant social group in any defined category of identity (e.g., age, race, gender, religion, ability) has greater social power to define cultural and institutional standards.

**SYSTEMIC (OR STRUCTURAL) RACISM** | A system of hierarchy and inequity, built over many years through laws, policies and practices, that is embedded in institutional, cultural and interpersonal levels and provides the power to maintain privilege and systematic discrimination to perpetuate, solidify and guarantee economic, political and social power that routinely advantages white people as a group while negatively impacting opportunities and outcomes for Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, Arabs and other racially oppressed people.

**WHITE SUPREMACY THINKING AND CULTURE** | Characterized by the belief that white people are a superior race and therefore should dominate society in ways of thinking, being and behaving. This result in preferential treatment, privilege and power for white people at the expense of people of color.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *Atlantic*, June 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Megan Ming Francis, “Let’s Get to the Root of Racial Injustice,” TEDx Rainier, March 21, 2016, [youtu.be/-aC-n72iXO9s](https://youtu.be/-aC-n72iXO9s).

<sup>29</sup> Coates, “The Case for Reparations.” See also Rothstein, *The Color of Law*.

<sup>30</sup> Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Dr. Joyce Caldwell** received her Ph.D. in human and organizational systems, with a concentration in transformative learning for social justice, from Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, Calif. She has worked in education and youth ministries, as director of a not-for-profit, and as a senior academic administrator in higher education. Her experience, knowledge and passion come together in developing, writing and leading programs in anti-racism.

Caldwell is a skilled adult educator and leading co-author of several resources on race, culture and white privilege, including the ELCA resource “Troubling the Waters for Healing of the Church: A Journey for White Christians From Privilege to Partnership” and web-based resource “One Body, Many Members.” A lifelong Lutheran, she is a member of Faith Lutheran Church in Cedarburg, Wis., and serves as vice president of the Greater Milwaukee Synod.



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