



An Overview of Ecumenical Relations between the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

For many decades, the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) (ELCA) and the [African Methodist Episcopal \(AME\) Church](#) have been ecumenical partners through coalitions such as the [National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA](#) (NCC) and the [World Council of Churches](#).

In the 1990s, the AME Church and the ELCA entered into theological dialogue seeking full communion. In 1996, the dialogue led to the co-publication of the congregational resource “[Understanding One Another](#).” (During these same years the ELCA entered into discourse with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, leading to our 2010 joint [Statement of Mission](#).) Over the years, the AME Church and the ELCA have engaged in various forms of cooperation and public witness together and with other ecumenical partners. One example is the presiding bishop’s sign-on and ELCA participation in Black Lives Matter Sunday, which was organized in December 2014 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church following a grand jury ruling to not indict a police officer in the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager, in Ferguson, Mo.

On June 17, 2015, Clementa C. Pinckney, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Lee Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton and Myra Thompson were murdered by Dylann Roof while they were gathered for Bible study and prayer at [Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church](#) in Charleston, S.C. Roof, a self-professed white supremacist, had been raised in an ELCA congregation. Two of the martyrs, pastors Pinckney and Simmons, were graduates of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton issued a [public statement](#), as did the [Lutheran World Federation](#). Eaton also sent a letter to then-AME Senior Bishop John Bryant and the Council of Bishops expressing the ELCA’s profound condolences and commitments to partnership. Graciously, the Senior Bishop invited Presiding Bishop Eaton to participate in the procession at the Rev. Dr. Clementa C. Pickney’s funeral, at which President Barack Obama gave the eulogy.

In July, the AME’s Council of Bishops issued a statement and ecumenical call to action in response to the Charleston shootings. The first part of the call to action was the AME Church’s invitation to ecumenical partners to join them in declaring Sunday, Sept. 6, a “Day of Confession, Repentance, Prayer, and Commitment to End Racism.” In a letter to then-Senior Bishop Bryant and other senior leaders, Eaton pledged the ELCA’s participation, which was supported by the ELCA Conference of Bishops and many rostered ministers. The second part of the call to action was a “Liberty and Justice for All” series of events organized by the Black Methodist Coalition in Washington, D.C., in September 2015. These events included a press

conference at the National Press Club, a briefing at the White House with senior administration officials and an ecumenical prayer service. Kathryn Lohre, assistant to the ELCA presiding bishop and executive for ecumenical and inter-religious relations and then-immediate past president of the NCC, was an invited speaker at the [press conference](#) and a participant in the prayer service.

Since December 2015, the ELCA has been a co-sponsor of the cross-racial dialogue convened by the annual consultation of the [Conference of National Black Churches](#) (CNBC). The CNBC is the umbrella organization of the eight largest Historic Black Churches in the United States. The annual consultation addresses ecclesial and policy issues that impact communities of African descent. The ELCA delegation, led by Eaton, has included leadership from the ethnic-specific associations, including the [African Descent Lutheran Association](#) and the [European Descent Lutheran Association for Racial Justice](#). CNBC leadership has invited its predominately white church partners to consider ways to expand and deepen this partnership. Since 2018 this has been in partnership with the NCC's [Act Now to End Racism](#) initiative.

In 2016, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted the resolution “Deepening Relationships with Historic Black Churches,” bolstering this work across the whole church and calling for greater coordination. That November, the NCC Governing Board met in Charleston. ELCA South Carolina Synod Bishop Herman Yoos and Lohre participated in the ecumenical service of remembrance at Mother Emanuel.

In January 2017, Bishop John White, then-president of the AME Council of Bishops, was received as a special guest by the ELCA Bishops’ Academy meeting in Charleston. Bishop White provided leadership during the Epiphany worship service at St Matthew’s Lutheran Church and joined the ELCA bishops in their pilgrimage to [Mother Emanuel](#). He also met with Eaton; Bishop Donald Kreiss, chair of the ELCA Conference of Bishops’ Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations Committee; Yoos and Lohre to explore renewed church-to-church relations. Since then, several meetings and conversations have taken place, seeking to build on the theological dialogue of the 1990s and 2000s, and considering potential forms of diapraxis for the future. Senior leaders of both churches have been invited to be present at each other’s assemblies as a sign of ongoing accompaniment.

In 2019, as a result of [grassroots organizing](#), the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) to establish June 17 as “Emanuel 9 Day of Repentance,” commemorating the martyrdom of Pickney, Graham-Hurd, Jackson, Lance, Middleton-Doctor, Sanders, Simmons, Coleman-Singleton and Thompson. The resolution calls for worship resources and deepening conversations with the AME Church on matters of racism and white supremacy. It was adopted alongside another [resolution](#) condemning white supremacy and racist rhetoric, and in the context of the ELCA’s public apology articulated in the “[Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent](#).”

The senior episcopal leadership of the AME Church sent a letter to Eaton following the Churchwide Assembly, noting that “Martin Luther was the ‘Great Reformer.’” Richard Allen started the AME Church to reform the racially divided American Christianity he experienced in his lifetime. It is appropriate that the Churches birthed by these two persons who sought more authentic and true expressions of Christianity engage in conversations that will lead to 21st Century reform, justice, and reconciliation.” In a letter of response, Eaton acknowledged the significance of the AME Church’s willingness to continue to engage in deeper conversations

with the ELCA, and affirmed our desire to build upon the long-standing ecumenical relations between our churches in witness to our unity in Christ in these divisive and deadly times. In September 2019, she highlighted this and other dimensions of the Churchwide Assembly's actions in the context of ongoing work in the ELCA and through ecumenical partnerships in a [pastoral message on racism and white supremacy](#).

In October 2019, Eaton was invited to preach at the opening service of the NCC's annual [Christian Unity Gathering](#) in the context of the ecumenical commemoration of the quadricentennial of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. During this gathering, Eaton convened the heads of communion of the predominately white churches to begin work together to combat white supremacy. She deputized Judith Roberts, director for racial justice in the Office of the Presiding Bishop, and Lohre to lead an ecumenical task force. This task force worked in early 2020 to develop a common definition of white supremacy, which was adopted as part of Eaton's report to the NCC Governing Board in May 2020. Next steps will be taken as part of the NCC's Act Now to End Racism initiative. Eaton has offered her continued leadership to the NCC and that of the ELCA in these efforts.

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