



EXPLANATION OF THE  
DECLARATION OF THE ELCA  
**to People of  
African Descent**



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
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## DECLARATION OF THE ELCA TO PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

*On June 27, 2019, the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted the following declaration as a statement addressed to people of African descent.*

***“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).***

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.

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.

The ELCA teaches that racism is sin and that racism denies the reconciling work of the cross.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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.

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<sup>1</sup> *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993), 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2013).

## WHY IS THE ELCA ISSUING THIS APOLOGY?

In 2015, the African Descent Lutheran Association (ADLA) called the ELCA 2016 Churchwide Assembly (CWA) to “draft a formal letter of repentance,” to commit to examine the church’s complicity in slavery, and to acknowledge “the ELCA’s perpetuation of racism.” This call was founded in the ELCA’s 1993 social statement *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, which confessed the sin of racism, defined this sin as “a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice,” and acknowledged that “skin color makes a difference” and that “white people benefit from a privileged position” as “we fall back into enslaving patterns of injustice.”<sup>1</sup>

In response, the assembly adopted social policy resolution CA 16.04.17, which resolves:

- To confess and repent of the Lutheran church’s complicity in four hundred years of enslavement, oppression, and marginalization of African-descent people and other marginalized populations;
- To acknowledge with regret that the ELCA as an institution has and continues to contribute to racial harassment and discrimination against people of African descent through corporate action, policy, and practices; and
- To request that the Domestic Mission unit, through its African Descent Ministries desk and in consultation with the African Descent Lutheran Association, create a “Declaration of the ELCA to the African Descent Community” and to bring this declaration, along with recommendations for how to include it in this church’s governing documents, to the April 2018 meeting of the ELCA’s Church Council.

The ELCA is issuing this apology alongside the Lutheran World Federation’s “Resolution on Commemorating the 2019 Quad-centennial of the Forced Transatlantic Voyage of Enslaved African Peoples to the Americas—Human Beings Not for Sale!,” adopted at the LWF Council meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, June 13-18, 2019. That resolution reads in part:

This year [2019] is the 400th anniversary of the forced transatlantic voyage of enslaved African peoples. The transatlantic slave trade impacted peoples in major regions of the world, including Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

The transatlantic slave trade, which ripped enslaved African peoples away from their rich traditions, histories, and assets, led to systematic oppression of people of African descent in the United States and globally; colonial and post-colonial policies; racist beliefs, policies, and practices; imbalances of privilege, power, and wealth; and the continuing demand for low or no-wage labor which are manifestations of the legacy of slavery.

The global ecumenical family, of which the LWF and its member churches are a part, is commemorating the 400th anniversary and engaging in work to address the legacy of slavery, the sin of racism, and the epidemic of human trafficking as part of the UN Decade in Solidarity with People of African Descent 2015-2024.

<sup>1</sup> *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993), 2.  
<https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Race-Ethnicity-and-Culture>



## WHY LOOK AT SLAVERY? IT HAPPENED IN THE PAST.

Slavery and its legacy inform our concept of race and the modern state of race relations in the United States. Race is a social construct with no basis in biology; it took shape in the U.S. through a process that assigned meaning to physical differences for social, political, and economic purposes. The idea of race was defined by scientists in the 1700s as they developed categories of human species and was cemented in the U.S. through the institution of slavery, with a hierarchy of whites as superior and blacks as inferior. The following laws and actions from the 1600s demonstrate how the idea of race was constructed and how it was used to benefit persons identified as white and to enslave people of African descent.

**1619** Twenty people from Africa are brought to Jamestown, Virginia, and sold into slavery.

**1640** Servitude for life is established, separating people by race into white and black. John Punch, a runaway black indentured servant, is sentenced to servitude for life; his two white indentured companions are sentenced to seven years of service.

**1641** Massachusetts becomes the first colony to legalize slavery; others soon follow.

**1662** Slavery becomes hereditary with a Virginia law that children born to an enslaved mother inherit her status.

**1664** Maryland mandates lifelong servitude for all enslaved blacks, with other colonies to follow.

**1667** Virginia declares that Christian baptism will not alter a person's status as a slave; other colonies follow with similar laws.

**1676** Bacon's Rebellion includes enslaved blacks and both black and white indentured servants. Laws passed in its wake discriminate by race, abolishing enslaved people's rights to bear arms, congregate in groups, testify in court, move around without a pass, and learn to read English, and permitting masters to kill an enslaved person during punishment.



Slavery and land stolen from indigenous peoples were firmly established in the British colonies as an economic system and were used to build a new nation and increase individual wealth. George Washington, the first U.S. president, owned up to 200 enslaved people. Thomas Jefferson, the third president and a wealthy slave-owner, argued in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* “that blacks were inferior to whites in reason and imagination: ‘This unfortunate difference of colour [sic], and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people.’”<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Constitution, adopted in 1787, included a Fugitive Slave Clause that allowed slaves, including those from “free states,” to be returned to their owners; it also provided for the U.S. Census to count each slave as three-fifths of a person.

Politically and economically, the new nation was built on the backs of enslaved people of African descent, along with other people of color, while continuing to establish the rights and supremacy of whites. In 1790, the Naturalization Act denied naturalization to anyone who was not a free white, and the 1857 Supreme Court ruling on *Dred Scott v. Sandford* denied citizenship to all slaves, ex-slaves, and descendants of slaves. Under President Andrew Jackson, voting rights were expanded to include all white males over the age of 21, firmly establishing the benefit of whiteness. As the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished in 1865 with the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, four million enslaved people were freed. That freedom, however, was short-lived as new forms of oppression took shape.

## SLAVERY IS OVER, SO WHY CAN'T WE JUST MOVE ON?

While the Thirteenth Amendment promised to end slavery as it was then known, the amendment's provisions allowed slavery or involuntary servitude as punishment for crimes<sup>3</sup> and thereby allowed slavery to be rebuilt in another form, first through convict leasing in the years following the Civil War and more recently through tough-on-crime policies and mass incarceration, which have disproportionately impacted people of African descent and other persons of color. As Michelle Alexander writes in her book *The New Jim Crow*:

Like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race.<sup>4</sup>

The ELCA social statement *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries* (2013) states, “The ELCA believes that present criminal justice practices and legislation have produced blatantly unacceptable results with respect to race.”<sup>5</sup>

Race, as it was constructed through 245 years of enslavement, therefore continued to take on meaning and impact after the abolishment of slavery. Images, stereotypes, laws, and practices

<sup>2</sup> Robert P. Forbes, “Notes on the State of Virginia (1785),” Encyclopedia Virginia, paragraph 17. [www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Notes\\_on\\_the\\_State\\_of\\_Virginia\\_1785](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Notes_on_the_State_of_Virginia_1785)

<sup>3</sup> US Const, Amend XIII. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/amendmentxiii>

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 13.

<sup>5</sup> *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2013), 14.

defined the political, economic, and social oppression of people of African descent. The 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* portrayed black men as dangerous, unintelligent, and sexually aggressive toward white women. Those images were used to instill fear and to maintain social separation of people defined as white and black. Black Codes were enacted immediately after the Civil War to limit the freedom of people of African descent and to ensure the continuation of a cheap labor force through sharecropping and the accumulation of debt. Jim Crow laws were enacted to legalize separation of whites and blacks, with the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* enshrining “separate but equal” as a legal principle. During the 90 years of Jim Crow and 60 years of “separate but equal,” more than four thousand black people were publicly lynched in the U.S. in acts of terror.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, free from oppressive and restrictive laws, white people benefited politically, socially, and economically. White people and white systems continued to exert power and superiority through practices of harassment and intimidation, redlining and denial of loans, restrictive covenants for housing, restrictions of voting rights, white flight, and lack of access to good schools, transportation systems, and jobs. The institution of slavery ended in 1865, but its legacy has continued to do harm in “how economic forces work against people of color in housing, medical care, education, and employment.”<sup>7</sup>

## 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 the U.S., people identified as white benefit from their skin color whether or not they’re descended from a slave-owning family, whether they’re recent immigrants or their ancestors have been in this country for several generations, and whether they come from an upper or lower socioeconomic class. The timeline and examples above show that racial systems have been constructed throughout history and have given social, economic, and political meaning to racial identities. In 1988, writer Peggy McIntosh expanded the understanding of white privilege as she developed a list of advantages enjoyed by white people simply because of skin color. These privileges range from normalizing whiteness through regular items, such as flesh-colored Band-Aids, to seeing white people widely represented as having founded this country. Within the church, white and black worshippers were raised with images and stained-glass windows of a white Jesus and white disciples, and generally accepted these depictions as fact. In school, teachers and textbooks taught that the inventors, scientists, writers, and artists who built this country were primarily white.<sup>8</sup>

“As white people in the U.S., we each have our personal stories that may make privilege difficult to see,” writes Joyce Caldwell in “Troubling the Waters for Healing of the Church.”

<sup>6</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3rd Ed. (2017), paragraph 9. <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>

<sup>7</sup> *Freed in Christ*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (Racial Equity Tools, 1988). <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mcintosh.pdf>

Too often we hear in ourselves—and in others—that we are not racist. We are not privileged. After all, we may have grown up with few resources, and we have generally all worked for what we have. What we fail to see is that we have a moving platform (as in the airports) of privilege making our path easier. I grew up on a farm. We had few resources. I was poorer than many of the young people in my high school. I didn't see I had advantages. I worked hard in education and jobs. But then I have to look hard at the log in my own eye. I have to look at the chains of privilege and know that I am White. I benefit. I am privileged. My ancestors were able to vote; to obtain loans and build ownership; to have access to the schools and colleges of choice; to choose where to live. Those benefits accrue through the generations. Despite differences of socio-economic class, white skin provides a benefit in and of itself.<sup>9</sup>

Unearned privilege runs deep, and white people can't escape it. It is not based on individual attitudes or behavior. Racism is a system of structural advantage. The concept of race was built for political and economic advantage for those who are white at the expense of indigenous people and people of color. Enslavement of people of African descent provided the free labor that built the U.S. Capitol building and many churches and university buildings, along with much of the wealth of the U.S.

## WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF LUTHERANS RELATED TO SLAVERY?

Although the practice of slavery was legal, it was morally and ethically wrong. The ELCA has defined racism as sin, but that acknowledgement requires examination of complicity in slavery. Writer R.M. Chapman examines three responses among Lutherans prior to the Civil War—slave-owning, antislavery, and quietism.<sup>10</sup> While Lutherans entered the debate on slavery relatively late compared to other denominations, in 1862, the General Synod split between North and South over the issue of slavery. Lutherans in southern states had been slaveholders since at least the 1730s. In the years leading up to and through the Civil War, southern Lutherans defended slavery and white racial superiority, supporting their positions with Scripture.

Some Lutherans in the South questioned the morality of slavery, along with Lutherans in the North. The Franckean Synod of New York was the most vocal in taking an abolitionist stance and rebuking slavery as sin. “On the whole, Lutherans did not become strong anti-slavery advocates, nor did they champion the cause of free blacks in the North or the South.”<sup>11</sup> Lutherans were complicit in slavery as they largely stood by in passively accepting the practice as the law of the land. With much of the Lutheran church's history and emphasis on being an immigrant church, Lutherans as a whole remained on the sidelines through the Jim Crow years and much of the civil rights era and subsequent years, with pockets of advocacy and political action.

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9 “Troubling the Waters for Healing of the Church: A Journey for White Christians From Privilege to Partnership” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2004).

10 R.M. Chapman, “Just Enough? Lutherans, Slavery, and the Struggle for Racial Justice,” *The Cresset* (LXXI) 5 (2008), 16-20. [http://thecresset.org/2008/Trinity2008/Chapman\\_T2008.html](http://thecresset.org/2008/Trinity2008/Chapman_T2008.html)

11 Ibid, paragraph 10.



## WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE?

Since the beginning of the enslavement of people of African descent in 1619 and through the 245 years of chattel slavery, people of African descent resisted their oppression, through rebellions, running away, and day-to-day actions.<sup>12</sup> Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831 is well known, but collectively all rebellions, whether or not they were able to be executed, demonstrated the will of those who were enslaved to end the dehumanizing and morally corrupt institution of slavery. Enslaved persons also resisted and sought their freedom through running away, with Harriet Tubman alone helping over 200 people escape to freedom. For those who could not escape, resistance came through day-to-day actions played out against their workload and the property of their masters.

In 1857, Frederick Douglass, a former slave and an ardent abolitionist and supporter of women's rights, noted the important role that the resistance of the oppressed plays in awakening the conscience and morality of both the government and the church:

For a long time [slaveholders] have taught our Congress, and Senate, and Pulpits, what subjects should be discussed, and what objects should command our attention. ... This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.<sup>13</sup>

People of African descent continued to press for freedom in taking roles of government leadership in state houses and the U.S. Congress during the years of Reconstruction; in establishing black colleges and universities; in continuing acts of resistance and calls for freedom during the Jim Crow era; in becoming skilled in the law to argue cases for freedom and equal treatment; and in standing up, sitting down, and raising voices and fists for freedom during the civil rights movement. The press for freedom continues in advocacy and action against mass incarceration and in the Black Lives Matter movement.

From the days of enslavement to the current day, the black church has been instrumental in providing a place for those facing oppression in daily life to hear words of hope and be engaged in communities of action. The voices of hope and resistance against injustice have been proclaimed in small prayer gatherings of enslaved people, from pulpits at Historical Black Churches, and from black pastors and predominately African American congregations in the ELCA. Those voices are present now in the call to renewed action from the African Descent Lutheran Association.

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<sup>12</sup> L. Vox, "3 Major Ways Slaves Showed Resistance to Slavery," Thoughtco (retrieved July 2, 2019). <https://www.thoughtco.com/ways-slaves-showed-resistance-to-slavery-45401>

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Douglass, "West India Emancipation," *University of Rochester Frederick Douglass Project: Writings* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, 1998-2018), paragraphs 31, 43. <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/4398>

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE AS A CHURCH?

Recognizing the words of Frederick Douglass that “power concedes nothing without a demand,” those who are white within the ELCA must listen to and follow the leadership of people of African descent in implementing the intent of “Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent.”

The 2016 adopted social policy resolution “Renewed Action Regarding Racism Toward Lutherans of African Descent” (CA16.05.17) calls for a recommitment “to create, sustain and reinvest in African descent communities, congregations, and ministries” and to “recommit this church to growing its ethnic and racial diversity” in leadership, congregations, and communities.

In addition, the ELCA Church Council adopted the following actions on June 27, 2019:

- To call this church into a time of study and to support the apology by encouraging congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization to find ways to share this apology broadly;
- To encourage congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization to observe an annual Day of Repentance;
- To affirm the Lutheran World Federation Council resolution “Commemorating the 2019 Quad-centennial of the Forced Transatlantic Voyage of Enslaved African Peoples to the Americas—Human Beings Not for Sale!”;
- To engage in anti-racism and racial justice work, work toward economic justice—including the study of reparations.
- To work to address and end modern forms of slavery and human trafficking (CC19.06.23).

An apology is only empty words and promises unless it is accompanied by action, which is grounded in prayer, education, and soul-searching repentance. We trust that God can make all things new.



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## Public Documents

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