



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

**How Strategic and Authentic is Our Diversity;  
A Call for Confession, Reflection and Healing Action**

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## **ELCA Racism Controversy of 2021**

“How Strategic and Authentic is Our Diversity: A Call for Confession, Reflection and Healing Action,” adopted by the fifteenth triennial Churchwide Assembly on August 9, 2019 at Milwaukee, Wisconsin;

[https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy\\_Toward\\_Authentic\\_Diversity.pdf?\\_ga=2.268667378.2061013074.1595792543-301935741.1595430762](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy_Toward_Authentic_Diversity.pdf?_ga=2.268667378.2061013074.1595792543-301935741.1595430762) .

Ted Peters, “Overcoming ELCA Racism with Authentic Diversity,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 21:1 (February 2021); <https://learn.elca.org/jle/overcoming-elca-racism-with-authentic-diversity/>

Priscilla Paris-Austin and Elizabeth Rawlings, “A Clarifying response to the Journal of Lutheran Ethics and Ted Peters regarding the ELCA Strategy Towards Authentic Diversity,” *Disrupt Worship* (Lent 2021);

<https://www.disruptworshipproject.com/blog/> ;

<https://learn.elca.org/jle/a-clarifying-response-about-the-elca-strategy-towards-authentic-diversity/> .

Abraham Allende, “Letter from the ELCA Authentic Diversity Advisory Team,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 20:2 (February 2021); <https://learn.elca.org/jle/5401-2/>

Ted Peters, “Apologies to the authentic diversity advisory team,” *Dialog* 60:2 (2021) 1-6; <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12665>.



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## **How Strategic and Authentic is Our Diversity; A Call for Confession, Reflection and Healing Action**

*As adopted by more than a two-thirds vote (855-13) by the fifteenth triennial Churchwide Assembly on August 9, 2019 at Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*

### **Executive Summary from Task Force for Strategic Authentic Diversity**

Since its inception, this church has wrestled with the challenge of becoming an authentically multiethnic, multicultural church. The vision and promised “**kindom**” and reign of God lie within us. The transformative power for being God’s change agent in society is intricately bound to our own transformation as God’s people.

For the task force participants who created this report, the conversations, prayers, and reflections that informed the work were deeply personal and, at times, extremely painful. In many ways these conversations, prayers, and reflections have modeled the struggle toward authenticity in ethnic diversity that is both a challenge and an opportunity for this church in all its expressions.

The report calls not for a brand-new strategic plan but for this church, in faith and with integrity, to “go deeper.” It seeks:

- **Theological Framing and Equipping** that more broadly reflect the wide ethnic diversity of who we are, have been, and are yet becoming. Our church must dig deeper into the history and emerging theology that ground, clarify, and justify our call and continuing commitment to ethnic diversity and inclusion.
- **Healing Action** to address the personal woundedness perpetuated by racism and racial prejudice. Deeper diagnosis of the collective, structural, and systemic nature of these sins will give us the opportunity for deeper prescriptive action toward healing.
- **Structural Accountability** to deepen the intentional focus of ELCA policies, governance, related structures, agencies, and organizations, so that they might serve the goals and initiatives of an authentically diverse church in society.
- **Theological Education and Leadership Development** that, drawing on the aforementioned theological framing, equip leadership for a “*metanoia movement*,” a change of hearts and minds about the violent sin of racism and the value of diversity, equitable inclusivity, and racial justice.
- **Partnerships With Full Communion, Ecumenical and Interreligious Partners, and Related Organizations** that deepen our shared commitment and struggle toward authentic diversity and inclusion in our systems, structures, and organizations.

The task force has discerned a call to engage these opportunities more fully, deepening our work, our journey, and our joy as our church moves toward **Strategically Authentic Diversity**.

In the report’s final section, the task force lifts up **Recommendations** to be embodied in the life of the ELCA. A number of these are not new, but they warrant new attention, resources, and energy to be implemented.

The 2016 Churchwide Assembly adopted a resolution to create a task force composed entirely of persons of color from regions and synods across the country, so that the views and voices of this church so often unheard or unheeded might benefit the whole church. We have this ministry together.

The spirit and intent of the document are to help us transcend the paralysis of guilt and blaming and reach a shared accountability and honest relational engagement in the body of Christ.

Future Directions 2025 calls for a more equitable investment in the gifts and passions of people of color; those gifts are reflected in the vitality and leadership of the task force and this document.

Mindful of the marginalization that is evident throughout this church and society, the task force tried to be faithful to the work of naming and addressing with its recommendations, so that they might contribute to this church’s ongoing challenge to formulate its own goals and expectations for racial diversity and inclusion.



## Background Summary

At the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, voting members considered a proposal to delete from the ELCA constitution language directing that 10 percent of the members of its assemblies, councils, committees, boards, and other organizational units be people of color or whose primary language is other than English.<sup>1</sup> In response to the proposal, a resolution was presented to the assembly and adopted to create a Task Force for Strategic Authentic Diversity composed entirely of people of color (African Descent, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian and Pacific Islander, Arab and Middle Eastern, Latino) and inclusive of immigrant and LGBTQIA+ identities.

This task force listened to stories from across the ELCA and, mindful of working constructively with white allies within the church, consulted with the European Descent Lutheran Association for Racial Justice (EDLARJ). Throughout its work, the task force learned that the commitment and work of developing strategies for Multicultural Ministries has been done and continues to be happening in the church, though not always in full view or with public accountability. Drawing upon the Multicultural Ministry Strategy document “A Strategy for Proclamation of the Gospel” (1991), the subsequent “Recommitment to a Strategy for Proclamation of the Gospel” (1997), and the recommendations of the 2016 Multicultural Summit, the task force believes the time has come for the ELCA to live even more intentionally into what God calls us to be together.

Sharing collective wisdom and reviewing historical documents, the task force has come to a consensus on the following statement and recommendations. This document will offer the task force’s working definition of authentic diversity, provide a theological frame for the discussion, name the need for healing, address the question of structural accountability, examine our theological education and leadership development, and reflect upon our relationships with full communion, ecumenical, and interreligious partners and their related agencies. Finally, it will propose a set of recommendations in each of these areas.

## Authentic Diversity

**The manifold communities of the ELCA are called to exhibit *authentic diversity*— demographically matching the ethnic and racial composition of their respective contexts, as stated in the ELCA constitution (5.01.A16). They are likewise called to recognize that race and ethnicity intersect with other marginalizing traits (including gender, sexuality, and ability) and that people in these groups are also vulnerable.**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a predominantly white, middle-class church, most of whose members are of European descent. Intentional outreach efforts have increased the proportion of nonwhite members (African Descent, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian and Pacific Islander, Arab and Middle Eastern, and Latino) from 2 percent to 7.3 percent.<sup>2</sup> Yet this proportional increase coincides with a membership decline in white communities and congregations. Despite the ELCA’s numerous multicultural efforts, there is still a lack of authentic diversity in all its expressions. Racism exists within the ELCA, boldly and outwardly as well as subtly and inwardly. White privilege is systemic and persistent. The problem calls for a radical, systemic change in accordance with the proclamation of the gospel. The ELCA recognizes the perpetuation of racism still exists within the denomination despite personal good intentions. Yet, the systemic and structural ambiguity toward the elimination of racism continues.

In faithfulness to the biblical mandate to proclaim the gospel<sup>3</sup> requires us to foster greater equity, fairness, and justice at all levels of the ELCA to ensure authentic diversity. The ELCA recognizes that such diversity is not reflected across all three expressions of this church. The dominant center of power and privilege still resides with people of European descent and their culture, while people of color and/or whose primary language is other than English remain at the margins, along with their cultures and identities. This problem is compounded by the cross-cutting issues of gender, sexuality, and ability. As a result, we have not been able to fully partner with God in turning the ELCA into the just, inclusive, and authentically diverse community described in the priority area for action under goal one of Future Directions 2025, where the ELCA is called to “develop a deep and shared understanding of who we are as a Lutheran church and equip leaders and all the baptized to communicate our theology and beliefs in accessible and compelling ways.”<sup>4</sup> We have failed to realize our vision of a church that welcomes all people regardless of race, background, status, ability, family situation, and numerous other

<sup>1</sup> 5.01.B87., Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2013 ed. (Chicago: ELCA, 2013), pg. 25.

<sup>2</sup> “Statistical Review of the Ethnic Specific Ministry Participation,” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, February 2016.

<sup>3</sup> “Recommitment to a Strategy for Proclamation of the Gospel,” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> “Future Directions: Goal One,” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



identifiers.<sup>5</sup> The ELCA continues to be the whitest denomination in the U.S.

In a country where 39 percent of the population are people of color, only structural and systemic reinforcement can account for the glaring whiteness of our church. Thus, the work of this task force is rooted not in charity or pity but in resistance to tokenism and the nominal representation of cultures in ELCA structures. We work toward seeing a fuller glimpse of God's image and the fullness of God's creation. In addressing the need for authentic diversity within the ELCA, we strive for what the Holy Spirit created in the Pentecost moment: the fullness of God's diversity and creativity existing simultaneously in space and time.

We condemn any form of discrimination or harassment based on color, gender, race, ethnicity, social or socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender expression, or physical or intellectual (mental) ability. We propose a *metanoia* (a change of heart and mind) to dismantle structures of discrimination. We yearn to promote systemic and structural strategies to establish and ensure authentic diversity.

### **Theological Framework: Why Strategic Authentic Diversity?<sup>6</sup>**

In Mark 12:31, as part of the Great Commandment, Jesus tells the disciples, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Our baptismal covenant reminds us that "We will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, we will strive for justice and peace among all peoples and respect the dignity of every human being."

Therefore, we seek authentic diversity not as an option but in obedience to the Great Commandment, in affirmation of our baptismal promise, in proclamation of the gospel, and toward the restoration of God's beloved community from the brokenness we have created. The need for this authentic diversity, tied to incarnational identity and a Lutheran theological framework, is expressed in goal two of Future Directions 2025, which in part aims to "form and equip the baptized to express their faith through their life and witness as followers of Jesus."<sup>7</sup> Part of this expression of faith is to acknowledge our identities as both saints and sinners when we address the realities of authentic diversity within the ELCA.

As proclaimed in our confessions, we have marred the body of Christ and the household of faith<sup>8</sup> through what we have done and have left undone. The sin of racism, like all sin, causes brokenness, so no one should be surprised that this sinfulness is manifested in the ELCA. Racism—a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice—and other forms of oppression are sins, violating God's intention for humanity. As Lutherans, we honor the value of calling a thing what it is, shining a light on evil to reveal it to the world. Since the inception of the ELCA, our aim has been to achieve a gospel vision of community. Though the church has developed strategies for multicultural ministry,<sup>9</sup> named racism as sin,<sup>10</sup> and even continues to affirm the importance of multiculturalism,<sup>11</sup> we have fallen far short of affirming authentic diversity. Thus, the ELCA had committed and recommitted itself to "an ongoing comprehensive [multicultural] ministry."<sup>12</sup> Healing together is our responsibility. Dismantling racism and building an inclusive community are things we must do together.

As Martin Luther counseled us, we can do no good works of our own accord. It is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to speak, listen, and act, as on the day of Pentecost. Article 20 of the Augsburg Confession states:

[I]t may be readily seen that this doctrine is not to be charged with prohibiting good works, but rather the more to be commended, because it shows how we are enabled to do good works.

This work of justice, peacemaking, and reconciliation is not only our call; we are equipped to perform it, as members, congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. In this humbleness we can remember that Christ has given us the ministry of reconciliation<sup>13</sup> and that we belong to each other.

<sup>5</sup> "Recommitment to a Strategy for Proclamation of the Gospel."

<sup>6</sup> In accordance with "Recommitment to a Strategy for Proclamation of the Gospel."

<sup>7</sup> "Future Directions: Goal Two," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

<sup>8</sup> In Romans 12:4-5 and Ephesians 2:19, the apostle Paul gives us the image of the body of Christ and the household of God.

<sup>9</sup> "A Strategy for Proclamation of the Gospel," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Called Forward Together in Christ, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> "Recommitment to a Strategy for Proclamation of the Gospel."

<sup>13</sup> "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation"



If we remain silent, it may be as Mordecai told Esther:

God will bring healing, relief and deliverance to the world from another place. And, who knows? That you have come to your privileged position for such a time as this.<sup>14</sup>

As we address the theological framework for authentic diversity, we recount that we are a humanity enslaved to sin and falling short of the glory of God.<sup>15</sup> We also recount that we are a church gathered in freedom and looking toward the freedom of God's reign as announced and embodied by Jesus. Trusting the promise of freedom, we confess that each of us is held captive by sin.<sup>16</sup> Because we are sinners as well as saints, we rebuild walls that were broken down by Christ, fall back into enslaving patterns of injustice, and betray the truth that sets us free. Because we are saints as well as sinners, we reach for the freedom that is ours in Christ.

The racial, ethnic, and cultural barriers erected by racism and other forms of oppression deny the truth that all people are created by God and, therefore, created in dignity. Racism and other forms of oppression fracture and fragment church and society. When we speak of racism and other forms of oppression as though they were only matters of personal attitude, we underestimate them. We have only begun to comprehend the complexity of the sin, which spreads like an infection through the entire social system. Racism and other forms of oppression infect and affect everyone, though their impact varies according to race, ethnicity, culture, and such additional factors as gender, sexuality, and ability.

As siblings in Christ, baptized into the priesthood of all believers, we must hold one another accountable in confession and repentance. Racism may affect each of us differently, but we must take responsibility for our participation, acknowledge our complicity, repent of our sin, move toward restoration, and pray to God for reconciliation.

### Healing: Why Healing?<sup>17</sup>

The historical and contemporary reality of racism demonstrates that racism is violence, manifested in multiple ways to injure and harm individuals and the greater society. The church in society as an agency of the redemptive, restorative will, and reign of God, carries a responsibility and an opportunity to be a primary facilitator of healing from the generational trauma of racism, internalized racial oppression, white supremacy, and racial injustice in contexts both foreign and domestic.<sup>18</sup>

The ELCA, as church in society, has been and is complicit in this racial hindering and harm—institutionally, systemically, and structurally. This hindering and harm must first be boldly named and identified as diminishing the life and vitality of the ELCA's congregations, synods, churchwide organization, and related agencies and institutions. As the ELCA was unable to reach a constitutional goal of 10 percent people of color/and or whose primary language is other than English by 1998, it was removed from the ELCA constitution in 2016. The removal was attempted en bloc (without discussion) but was brought to the floor of the 2016 Churchwide Assembly by concerned voting members who saw the placement of the 10 percent goal in an en bloc motion as an offense made to marginalized communities within the ELCA.

Our church must, with increasing intentionality, acknowledge and name the deep and pervasive wound of racism. Our church must boldly recognize and renounce the many forms of denial that contribute to the continuation of racist thought, action, policy, and practice. Our church must fully engage in a *metanoia* movement—a change of heart and mind—that will, in partnership with the gospel, generate redemptive recognition, restorative justice, and the conscious development of capacity for healing. Goal three of Future Directions 2025 aims to equip church members to “understand, speak out, and act against discrimination based on race, gender, disability, sexual orientation and social status.”<sup>19</sup> If truly embodied and enacted, this can initiate a healing process within the ELCA.

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(2 Corinthians 5:18).

<sup>14</sup> Esther 4:14 (paraphrased).

<sup>15</sup> Romans 3:23.

<sup>16</sup> 1 John 8.

<sup>17</sup> How can we heal without honest and humble confession?

<sup>18</sup> The Task Force acknowledges there are other varied ways in which individuals experience oppression; gender, gender identities, sexuality, physical, and neurological difference, are only a few. These manifestations of diversity are of no less importance than the specific ethnic and cultural diversity named in this document.

<sup>19</sup> “Future Directions: Goal Three,” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



Some synods, associations, and congregations within the ELCA have shown leadership by developing antiracism programs, training antiracism facilitators, and working to prioritize the dismantling of racism within their communities. Yet this should be the work of all entities within the ELCA, not just a few. This work must boldly reflect the historical and present lived experiences and stories of those affected by racism and racial oppression within the ELCA.

### Structural Accountability

Within the myriad structures of the ELCA, people experience a diversity of faith journeys. Through these individualized experiences, people are called by God to accompany one another together in community. When transformed into Christ's image, one joins a community of people who affirm the values of diversity, dignity, compassion, justice, and inclusion, and who summon the courage to change and to invest in beloved community. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. defined beloved community as a "global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of all the earth." This vision can be realized only by creating a climate of accountability that grows out of love, not guilt. The ELCA's congregations, synods, colleges, universities, seminaries, and churchwide organization must become accountable in this journey of creating authentic diversity in observance of our baptismal promise. Working through the Holy Spirit, we are gathered and created to be a beloved community that includes all. This inclusivity is reflected in goal five of Future Directions 2025, especially through leadership in governance "to provide for clarity in roles and authority, strong relationships and shared leadership and a culture of willing accountability."<sup>20</sup>

The task force is committed to a calling that the manifold communities of the ELCA exhibit *authentic diversity*—demographically matching the ethnic and racial diversity of their contexts, as stated in the ELCA constitution (5.01.A16.), while also understanding that racial and ethnic diversity intersects with other marginalized identities (including gender, sexuality, and ability) and recognizing their vulnerability. To accomplish this, the church must embody Christ's mission through the lens of a *crucified* Jesus, who gathers all to himself in one family devoid of hierarchies and unhealthy power structures. This communal life mutually respects, nurtures, and embraces, with the certain hope that, though each member of the community remains unique, our fellowship will transcend age-old borders that hinder forward progression and God will be glorified.

### Theological Education and Leadership Development

Theological education within the ELCA is highly Eurocentric and rooted in hierarchical colonial education practices. ELCA colleges, universities, and seminaries are overwhelmingly white communities of privilege at all levels of staff, faculty, students, and decision-making bodies. The curriculum of our seminary education makes room for other races and cultures only when they are palatable and serve as foils to a Eurocentric, predominantly white agenda. Our institution and churches pay minimal attention to social movements such as "Black Lives Matter." Over the years, theological education within the ELCA has failed to equip Lutherans with an understanding of the gospel that can help dismantle racist practices and structure within our churches and institutions. The inadequacy of theological education and leadership formation in our church should be addressed by engaging voices from the margins.

Without enforcing assimilation, colleges, universities, and seminaries must create equity and equitable opportunities to study theology, share in privilege and power, and serve the people of God. Students, faculty, and staff of color must be given equitable opportunities to participate in seminaries, congregations, and decision-making bodies at all levels of leadership, including boards, presidencies, permanent chairs, etc. This must be modeled by this church's leadership, starting at the churchwide organization.

Specifically, within leadership formation, seminaries must create spaces and resources for people of color to engage in higher education. Programs, such as Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) and lay mission schools, need to be promoted to recognize the leadership and gifts that people of color bring to make the ELCA a truly diverse church. Discernment and candidacy for ministry must be systems of support and not processes of inhibition and intimidation, especially for people of color.

We need theological education and leadership formation that affirms our freedom to embrace and uphold the gospel mandate. This mandate is biblically rooted and centers on the life, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. Instead, the values upheld by ELCA colleges and seminaries have been predominantly those of the status quo, reinforcing a colonial, Eurocentric model of education and leadership.

We need theological education and leadership formation that is life-giving, transforming, and transcending. It

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<sup>20</sup> "Future Directions: Goal Five," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



must also be honest, impartial, and inclusive. With education and leadership focused primarily on western and Eurocentric voices, the stories of those who do not fit such a model are excluded from the greater narrative of the gospel. This is a denial of identity and existence. Theological education and leadership must endorse not a single, controlling narrative but a collection of stories and experiences that bring wholeness to the body of Christ as represented in God's creation. Goal three of Future Directions 2025 must be made manifest in theological education and leadership cultivation, particularly in building "confidence and competence among lay leaders and rostered ministers to provide an authentic welcome to people from different cultures and circumstances and embrace the ideas and experience they bring."<sup>21</sup> When we know and embrace one another's complete story within God's created world, we have a greater ability to share honestly, to be impartial, and to live into inclusivity and authentic diversity.

We need theological education and leadership formation that honors and embraces the covenant of being "reconciled in Christ." We need a new hermeneutic in speaking of reconciliation with one another, focused on a crucified and resurrected Christ. We must also recognize that reconciliation is not a singular event but a process that must be fostered, cultivated, and developed over time to pass on to future generations.

Finally, we need theological education and leadership formation that practices cultural humility while also engaging the power of the gospel. There is no single cultural context in which the gospel exclusively resides or is better comprehended. Both the gospel and our various cultures are important to the church of which we are a part.

### **Partnerships with Full Communion, Ecumenical, and Interreligious Partners, and With Related Organizations**

Given the changes happening around the world, many denominations, institutions, and organizations have been reexamining their traditional postures toward justice and discrimination. Social change cannot be stopped, so the church must embody the gospel of Jesus Christ and not fear change.

The time has come to embody what we believe and preach, yet never forgetting the lessons learned of past inaction and indifference that have lasting generational impacts. Past inactions and stances of indifference include adhering to the doctrine of discovery, slavery, and the accumulation of wealth at the expense of marginalized communities. The church must renew its commitment to the fullness of authentic diversity represented in God's creation within denominations, institutions, and organizations. We must seek, ask, and understand the stories of those impacted by inaction and indifference. We must recognize what divides us, what continues to hurt the fullness of God's creation, and begin a communal process that will embody compassion and understanding.

We recognize that many of the ELCA's full communion partners struggle with similar histories of inaction and indifference. Many of these partners have recognized and are learning from their past actions, especially concerning authentic diversity. Some denominations and institutions have moved faster than others, yet all have recognized that justice work and partnerships cannot survive in a vacuum. There is a common belief that, to strive for and embody justice, we must commit to working together. This commitment must be made active and tangible through allocation of resources, including people and money. Investing in partnerships with other denominations, institutions, and organizations can prompt a congregation to reassess its views<sup>22</sup> and can create new opportunities to develop training and educational material for youth and children.<sup>23</sup>

The ELCA is not alone in working toward authentic diversity. We must take advantage of the work already completed and lessons already learned from our ecumenical partners and related organizations. We have the unique opportunity to share not only resources but also the burden of labor. We must consult and learn from different organizations within the ELCA—such as Women of the ELCA—that have been deeply invested in addressing discrimination and racial justice for some time. This need for partnership is reflected in goals one and four of Future Directions 2025, recognizing the need for dialogue and coordinated action with ecumenical partners and related organizations to embody the church we desire to be.

We must ask ourselves how the ELCA has not only allowed but also perpetuated a culture of division that has kept us from an authentic diversity. In seeking answers, we must discern with our full communion partners and related organizations what it means to embody the vision of a beloved community. As siblings in the gospel, we must be invested in this work together, so that we might not only learn from one another but also work together

<sup>21</sup> "Future Directions: Goal Three," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

<sup>22</sup> "Welcoming Diversity: An Inventory for Congregations," Partners for a Racism-Free Community, [www.prfc-gr.org](http://www.prfc-gr.org).

<sup>23</sup> "AntiRacism/Diversity – Required Training – Sept 29," United Church of Christ.



to bring about the fullness of God's reign. This involves learning lessons from years past, reassessing and recalibrating our work,<sup>24</sup> beginning a process of healing, and committing to embody change from within ourselves and our institutions.

## Recommendations

To help the church to fully engage in a *metanoia* (a change of heart and mind) movement, the task force has developed recommended responses to be embodied within the ELCA. Some of these recommendations are currently being implemented, whereas others will require a thoughtful, communal, and embodied response that can move us to better comprehend and incarnate authentic diversity within the expressions of the ELCA.

### Recommendations for Healing

#### 1. Awareness

Raising awareness calls us to:

- Host learning opportunities for a deeper understanding of the systemic and root causes of historical and contemporary racism and internalized racial oppression.
- Develop liturgical and teaching resources related to our baptismal covenant, with the need of confession as part of the awareness of naming and addressing racism within the ELCA.
- Encourage individuals to report instances of oppression, exclusion, etc. to a designated person outside their system who will document and facilitate resolution.

#### 2. Reflections

The work of reflections calls us to:

- Encourage those participating in the provided learning opportunities to write reflection papers, blogs, social media posts, etc. on insights gleaned from those sessions, and share their work within congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization.

#### 3. Training

The training for this work calls:

- ELCA synods, seminaries, colleges, and universities to require their staff and rostered ministers to participate in antiracism training every two to three years, and that training should be reported in the Ministry Leader Profile and annual reporting. This type of training is reflected in the 2016 Churchwide Assembly resolution on Racial Justice (CA16.05.22).
- Synods providing resources and training for their congregational members on white privilege, internalized racial oppression, and cultural humility. Such training would intersect with issues of gender, sexuality, class, ability, naturalization status, etc. in a way that is holistic, comprehensive and mutual.
  - Work in affinity groups, caucus groups, etc.
  - Empowerment through an educational process.
  - Support for gatherings such as Multicultural Summit.
- The Office of the Presiding Bishop develop a theological statement on deconstructing whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy.
  - Synods are strongly urged to include the statement in any antiracism training provided to rostered leaders.
  - The Office of the Presiding Bishop develop educational and worship resources that support the statement, for use by synods, congregations, and antiracism teams.
  - The churchwide organization incentivize training and teaching of the statement by linking a specified percentage of its financial support for Lutheran institutions of higher learning to the development and implementation of curricula that encompass the statement.

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<sup>24</sup> "A Strategy for Proclamation of the Gospel" and "Recommitment to a Strategy for Proclamation of the Gospel."



## Recommendations for Structural Accountability Call

1. The churchwide organization to develop an assessment process, to be utilized across all three expressions of the ELCA, that records, maps, and evaluates the efforts of diversity initiatives. Planning, Research and Evaluation, in partnership with appropriate churchwide staff and stakeholders, to create a Synod Accountability Report Card Toward Authentic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; synod bishops and directors for evangelical mission (DEMs) be responsible for providing data for this report card,<sup>25</sup> with the ultimate goal of an audit system across all three expressions of the ELCA.
2. Synods and the churchwide organization designate resources (for example, grants or the creation of specific funds) to incentivize multicultural educational events and antiracist leadership development for all leaders, both rostered and lay. This work will be done in alignment or conjunction with the vision for mission of Congregational Vitality.<sup>26</sup>
3. Because congregations of color are closing at a higher rate than white congregations, a racial equity assessment process be initiated to determine the reinvestment of resources whenever any congregation is in conversation for closure.
  - The Office of the Presiding Bishop create an office(r) for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The primary functions of this office will be (a) to equip and support leaders at all levels of the church to understand, speak out about, and act against discrimination based on race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, or social status, and (b) to receive reports of harassment and discrimination and to investigate such claims, working in conjunction with functioning areas such as marketing, legal counsel, and human resources. This office will also assess the organization's current representation and recruitment of people of color, people whose primary language is other than English, and other protected classes.
4. The Office of the Presiding Bishop and Conference of Bishops incorporate mandatory diversity training into its orientation of new bishops. Every current and established bishop be assigned a diversity and inclusion coach.
5. Synods and the Domestic Mission unit develop resources/funding for alternative communities to:
  - Assess and develop new measures of evaluation and benchmarks for ministries that do not follow traditional congregational models.
  - Increase representation of people of color and/or people whose primary language is other than English at synodical tables—including but not limited to the Vitality table, Stewardship Mission Support table, and Strategic Thinking table—to adapt strategies for creating and cultivating authentically diverse leadership.
6. Synods encourage all congregations to learn about their communities and neighborhoods, and to develop and implement outreach plans geared toward increasing authentic diversity representative of race, ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic class, and ability. The Domestic Mission unit will develop tools to aid congregations in this work.
7. The churchwide organization strongly encourage, appropriately prepare and incentivize synods and predominately white congregations to call rostered ministers of color, particularly women of color.
8. The churchwide organization work with synods to monitor the duration of the call process for people of color, particularly women of color. The average duration of the call process for white males will serve as a benchmark, and people of color still waiting for call after that amount of time has passed will receive priority.

<sup>25</sup> Gap Analysis from 1997 Recommitment assessment to today; Designate funding to Provide Intercultural competency program & work for congregations doing multicultural ministry or wanting to do it ([assessment](#), [tools for preparation](#), resources for development of readiness)

<sup>26</sup> [“Future Directions: Congregational Vitality,”](#) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



9. The churchwide organization in partnership with synods determine the extent to which all white or predominantly white congregations are implementing goal three of Future Directions 2025 and the extent to which they are engaged in outreach to people of color in their geographic location or beyond.
10. Synods and the churchwide organization incentivize (through financial support, human resources, student debt forgiveness, etc.) white or predominantly white congregations to call people from marginalized communities.
11. The Mission Advancement unit, in conjunction with the Ethnic Specific Ministries, Racial Justice, and Multicultural desks, develop a communications strategy to highlight the ELCA's efforts toward strategic authentic diversity. This includes alerting mainstream media to the ELCA's shifts in investment toward greater diversity and presenting our written and spoken history in a way that shows the true full diversity within the historical bodies of the ELCA.
12. The Church Council further empower this task force or create another external body to track this work, support the staff desk responsible for it, and the assessment of:
  - Intentional relationships between the areas doing this work;
  - Reporting and auditing process;
  - Full accountability for the work of strategic authentic diversity in alignment with goal five of Future Directions 2025.

### **Recommendations for Theological Education and Leadership**

1. The boards of ELCA colleges, universities, and seminaries be authentically diverse and focus on stakeholder engagement to ensure such diversity.
2. The staff of ELCA colleges, universities, and seminaries be authentically diverse, with professors, pastors, field education directors, and supervisors for internship and ministry in context who are people of color or LGBTQIA+ people of color, or who have shown the cultural competency to engage with communities of color and their many facets.
3. ELCA colleges, universities, and seminaries be multicultural centers offering space/safety, educational resources, and policy changes that address the specific needs of people of color in all their facets.
4. In consultation with the Theological Education Advisory Committee, synods and churchwide organization develop a comprehensive multicultural curriculum that integrates the concept of cultural humility. This curriculum will be part and parcel of the full requirements for being rostered in the ELCA.
5. Supervisors for internship and ministry in context and contextual education directors participate in antiracism training that includes all systemic oppressions and stresses a cultural humility representative of strategic authentic diversity.
6. The churchwide organization recommit monies from the Fund for Leaders capital campaign to the Educational Grant Program to ensure that such grants are intentionally and appropriately distributed to the communities of color for which they are intended. Specifically:
  - Develop a plan in partnership with ethnic-specific directors and associations to welcome the gifts, skills, and bodies of work of theologians and lay leaders from marginalized communities, and to promote and distribute the opportunities for learning from the work of theologians, teachers and leaders from marginalized communities.
  - Provide funding for mentorships between lay and rostered leaders of color and those interested in and exploring opportunities within lay and rostered ministry.



- Encourage pathways to leadership for people of color and people whose primary language is other than English, including church council boards, boards of Lutheran organizations, employment within the ELCA, and access to ELCA colleges, universities, and seminaries.
7. ELCA colleges, universities, and seminaries require a percentage of faculty to be representative of strategic authentic diversity.
  8. The churchwide organization create a database of rostered and lay leaders of color to create an effective networking platform.
  9. Synods and the churchwide organization invest in lay leadership schools and lay formation that is culturally responsive.
  10. ELCA seminaries provide guidance on incorporating cultural competency into the Hein-Fry Book of Faith Challenge and expanding its panels to be more representative of strategic authentic diversity.
  11. The churchwide organization strategically disburse Fund for Leaders scholarships to enhance the capacity of people of color who are TEEM candidates, non-English speakers, part-time students, or seminary students. Provide communities of color with opportunities for student leadership and reinstate the Horizon Internship Program so that students of color can train in their own communities.
  12. Synods and the churchwide organization institute annual leadership schools of governance that give people of color and persons impacted by poverty—particularly young adults from a diverse range of communities—the opportunity to both learn and affect governance, polity, structure, and practice of the ELCA’s three expressions.
  13. The churchwide organization create a pathway for lay congregational leaders of color to pursue greater leadership opportunities within their congregations and synods.
  14. The churchwide organization incentivize Lutheran institutions of higher learning to hire faculty, deans, and/or presidents from marginalized communities by linking such hires to a specified percentage of the financial support provided to those institutions.

**Recommendations for Partnerships With Full Communion, Ecumenical, and Interreligious Partners and Related Organizations**

1. Working in alignment with Congregational Vitality, synods and the churchwide organization to establish grants for congregations and synods to fund work that focuses on strategic authentic diversity.
2. The ELCA intentionally partner with The Episcopal Church (TEC) and other full communion, ecumenical and interreligious partners on justice, antiracism, and reparations, while also sharing resources and the burden of labor to broaden such work and relationships.
3. The Office of the Presiding Bishop and the Domestic Mission unit to review the racial audit processes of our full communion, ecumenical, and interreligious partners for the purpose of developing a similar audit within the ELCA.
4. Increase the level of intentional engagement with historically ethnic-specific religious communities, which includes through Churchwide Assembly memorials, and establish relationships with historically black denominations.
5. The churchwide organization, synods and other appropriate ELCA agencies work with full communion, ecumenical, and interreligious partners to address and name historical and current oppressions and tell the truth about denominational, congregational, and organizational wealth. This includes learning the racial



history of our religious partners, with areas of study including but not limited to:

- Kristallnacht,
- the massacre of the Mennonite,
- actions to/with the African-descent community,
- Salzburger,
- communities whose paraments, etc., were purchased by the Ku Klux Klan,
- repudiation of the doctrine of discovery, and
- the legacy of slavery.

6. Congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization research the titled curricula of full communion, ecumenical, and interreligious partners, utilizing and adapting educational materials for youth and children. This research will also include material from partners' publishing houses that have an ecumenical department. Because this is a common effort, the churchwide organization may need to incentivize congregations and synods by establishing grants to fund this work.
7. The churchwide organization work with the National Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation Communion Office, and the ELCA's synod partners to address the goal of strategic authentic diversity.
8. The churchwide organization honor the work of our related agencies through board development, engagement, and utilization of already existing curricula.
9. The churchwide organization monitor authentic diversity in representation on boards of ELCA Related Organizations.
10. The churchwide organization intentionally engage directors for evangelical mission and roundtables to increase diversity among senior pastors, executives at Lutheran social service organizations, CEOs, and other leadership positions within related organizations.



Ted Peters, "Overcoming ELCA Racism with Authentic Diversity," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 21:1 (February 2021); <https://learn.elca.org/jle/overcoming-elca-racism-with-authentic-diversity/>.

## Overcoming ELCA Racism with Authentic Diversity

[1] Our nation and perhaps the wider world have arrived at a *kairos* moment. The groundswell of support for "Black Lives Matter" may propel our society across the threshold to a new era of equality, justice, and multi-racial community. ELCA leadership has begun to take its own action by drafting, "How Strategic and Authentic is Our Diversity: A Call to Confession, Reflection and Healing Action."<sup>[i]</sup> This document has been drafted in good faith by conscientious colleagues in our beloved church. Yet, I believe that it needs critique and significant redrafting.

[2] What I fear is that, if executed, this strategy would backfire. It would actually perpetuate the very institutional racism it seeks to overcome. Why? My answer is subtle, but I will attempt to make it clear. Then, I would like to tender an alternative way to think about ELCA white racism and the strategy for overcoming it. In brief, here is my two-pronged recommendation: (1) we should cease feeding the unhappy consciousness of the ELCA white leadership and remove this white leadership from the center of our spiritual attention; and (2) we should ask people of color—perhaps by collecting anecdotes or even conducting in-person surveys—about what they need and would like to see happen in the ELCA.

[3] To say it another way, our strategy should include reversing the center of focus from the white axis and make the people of color the center. The present Authentic Diversity document will likely boomerang because it keeps the white axis in the center and peripheralizes once again those considered to be non-white.



[4] Let me alert you that I use a few terms that require specific definition. By *unhappy consciousness* I refer to a spiritual mindset that feels good when feeling miserable. By *fragile soul* I refer to the compulsion to always be right, even if confession of sin contributes to being right. By *white spirituality* or *white-centered spirituality* I refer to the dominant mood within our national church that maintains racism by, paradoxically, keeping attention directed to the white center even if that attention takes the form of confession, reflection, and healing. Finally, *sin boldly!* and the *robust soul* indicate a faith stance that focuses not on reiteration of contrition but rather on the love of neighbor that sets the neighbor's interest in the center.

#### SEVEN OBSERVATIONS ABOUT ELCA INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

[5] Our Authentic Diversity strategy perpetuates a self-centered form of spirituality. I suggest that this spirituality is an example of the unhappy consciousness. Let me explain with seven observations.

[6] OBSERVATION 1: The spirituality of today's ELCA largely perpetuates the pre-Reformation spiritual practice of the fragile soul, especially self-flagellation. This is an exercise in what philosopher G.W.F. Hegel called the unhappy consciousness (*das unglückliche Bewußtsein*) to describe a self that is divided within itself.<sup>[iii]</sup>

[7] How does unhappy consciousness work in spiritual practice? Imagine yourself to be a monk or a nun in a medieval monastery. You are practicing asceticism, that is, you are abstaining from worldly pleasures to pursue spiritual goals. You have made vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity. You cultivate self-sacrificial habits such as prayer, hospitality, compassion, and almsgiving. You request a physical flogging to rid yourself of sins such as pride or judging others. The more you suffer, the better you feel. The inverted logic goes like this: *the unhappier I am the happier I am*. The degree of your happiness becomes correlated to the degree of your agony.

[8] Just how does this unhappy consciousness manifest itself in ELCA leadership and in the Authentic Diversity strategy? Whips are gone. To replace self-flagellation by

whip, today's leaders invite verbal flagellation by those who call racism a "sin" and pin it on those belonging to the group self-designated, "white." The more severe the denunciation, the better (we) white progressives feel. The dirtier we feel, the more justified we feel. Now, contrition, confession, and repentance are good things, to be sure; but perpetuation of this ritual is not the path to overcoming ELCA racism. "Call for Confession, Reflection and Healing Action" will likely guarantee the continuance of this form of spirituality.

[9] OBSERVATION 2: If we "dig deeper into the history and emerging theology" of the Lutheran tradition, something important will get uncovered: today's dominant spirituality of the unhappy consciousness actually ignores Martin Luther's emancipation from the fragile soul and his embracing of the robust soul, the soul of the bold sinner.<sup>[iii]</sup> Here is what Luther actually says: "Christian individuals do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor, or else they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love."<sup>[iv]</sup> This means, according to St. Olaf theologian Deanna Thompson, that we are liberated from living our lives "obsessed with our own failings and imperfections."<sup>[v]</sup> By ignoring Luther's doctrine of Christian freedom, our white progressives can keep obsessing about their own failings and imperfections. Institutional racism will persist through this *Kairos* moment without interruption.

[10] OBSERVATION 3: The Authentic Diversity strategy along with widespread media rhetoric blurs the once sharp distinction between prejudice and racism.<sup>[vi]</sup> *Prejudice* denotes personal or cultural bias, whereas *racism* denotes impersonal institutional structures that function in a discriminatory way. If we use the term 'racism' when talking about 'prejudice', it will turn everyone's attention to white spirituality. It will keep the whites at the center of attention.

[11] BACKGROUND. Toward the end of the 1960s, America's civil rights leaders had made a large number of white friends, friends who were passionately dedicated to equality and justice. Even so, these African American leaders observed something puzzling. Although their white friends were no longer racially prejudiced, institutions were not changing. Institutions with non-prejudiced white liberals in



charge still put up barriers to block advancement by minorities. African American leaders applied the term, 'racism' [institutional, structural, or systemic racism], to institutional discrimination regardless of whether the white guard is prejudiced or not.[vii]

[12] During the birth process of the ELCA in 1987, a firm commitment to vigilance in the struggle to overcome prejudice against minority races and against women was declared. Officially, the ELCA would be a church body adamantly opposed to prejudice; and the ten percent representation rule became an institutional expression of that heartfelt commitment. The "*metanoia movement*, a change of hearts and minds about the violent sin of racism and the value of diversity, equitable inclusivity, and racial justice," took place at that time 33 years ago. However, despite this official denunciation of prejudice, the ELCA for three decades has continued to be a racist institution — "The ELCA continues to be the whitest denomination in the U.S." — failing to attain its goals of becoming a racially diverse church. An invisible force seems to be frustrating its non-prejudiced leadership. What might that force be? Perhaps it is the unhappy consciousness at work.

[13] By ignoring the distinction between institutional racism and personal prejudice, the Authentic Diversity strategy permits today's Lutherans to return to 1987 and wallow again in the matter of prejudice, a matter already settled. By returning to the period of "Confession, Reflection, and Healing Action," resources would be squandered and made unavailable for dealing with the present problem, namely, institutional racism. Here is my single most important recommendation to the drafters of Authentic Diversity: change this to more pragmatic priorities!

[14] OBSERVATION 4: Thank God that the ELCA is already ethnically diverse, even if the numbers may be disproportionately distributed.



[15] OBSERVATION 5: Unfortunately, the Authentic Diversity strategy redefines the ELCA racially—that is, the ELCA becomes a white church.

[16] Importantly, whiteness is not a stable category. Whiteness meshes together from the various traditions just those Lutherans who represent the idea of the white race. Even more curiously, the construction of whiteness takes a language family, Spanish, and turns it into a non-white racial group. Race? Language? More than fifty percent of those whose primary language is Spanish in the U.S. declare themselves to be white.

[17] Yes, we see this as a confused form of prejudice in the wider society. But, I ask: why would the ELCA feel compelled to follow suit? Regardless of how distinct and individual people are, the Authentic Diversity strategy has constructed a single privileged in-group defined against everybody else as the other, as an out-group. Is this not the very problem we had sought to overcome?



[18] When a German speaking immigrant joins the ELCA clergy roster, he or she does not get marginalized into the category of someone whose language is other than English. Nor into the category of a person of color. Why? ELCA othering applies only to people who speak Spanish. Curious. *De facto*, our white leadership determines who is “in” and who is “other.” How long must this continue?

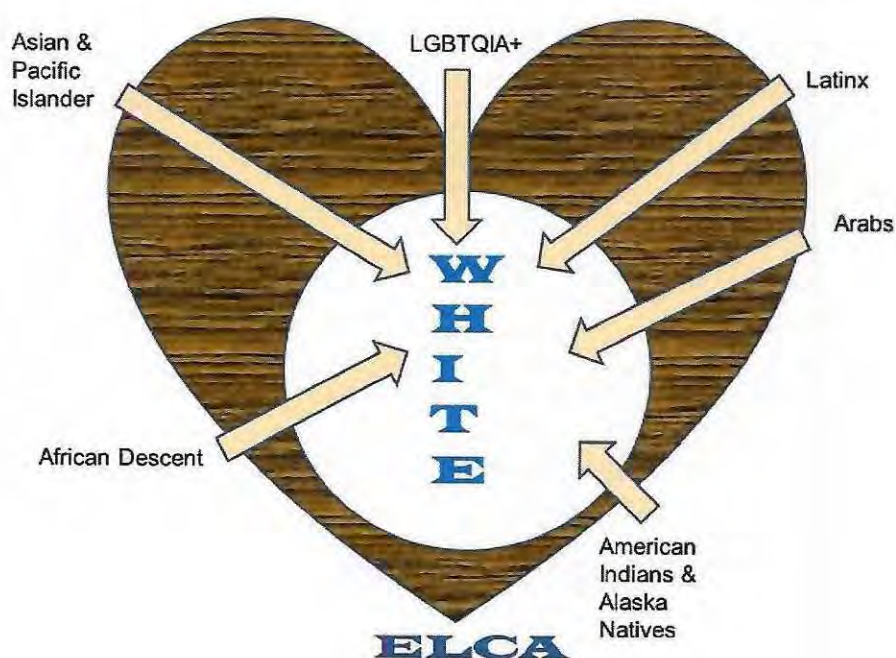
[19] By keeping white spirituality as the center of ELCA focus, I fear, Authentic Diversity will make all non-white church members and pastors feel like they do not belong. Because the ELCA “is a predominantly white, middle-class church, most of whose members are of European descent,” this description subtly justifies a prescription: the dominant group is a single race, the white race. This step keeps the white race in the center and the non-whites at the periphery, perpetuating the very problem this strategy is aimed to solve.



20] OBSERVATION 6: The Authentic Diversity strategy authorizes a one-way criticism process. Those not included in the white race are encouraged to verbally flagellate the white-privileged-center. Why? So that the whites can feel spiritually justified. There is no obvious need for non-whites to receive similar admonition or

feel justified through this process. [I do not recommend a two-way criticism, please be clear].

[21] Paradoxically, this one-way criticism paves the way for the fragile white soul to purchase an indentured servant to serve its unhappy consciousness. The direction of spiritual critique will maintain white-centeredness and perpetuate the institutional racism we want to see overcome. Let me be clear: the negative critique regarding residual prejudice may very well be warranted. The problem is the white-centeredness of a spiritual practice that could consume the whole church.



22] OBSERVATION 7: The result of the Authentic Diversity strategy would most likely keep the ELCA centered around whiteness; and it would do so while feeling morally justified. Here is the risk that gives me nightmares: those Lutherans now defined as non-white will feel excluded. They may even feel they have become indentured to white spirituality. By placing non-white Lutherans into serving the insatiable spiritual masochism of the unhappy consciousness, white Lutherans will



maintain a firm grip on church structures while feeling morally justified. Unless the Authentic Diversity strategy gets reoriented, I fear this will be the ELCA fate.

[23] Because of the obnoxiousness of current white-centrist spirituality, just this past year one of my finest Latin American M.Div. students at our Lutheran seminary in Berkeley has decided to delay if not avoid ordination entirely. “There were an awful lot of ‘statements’, ‘confession’, and ‘repudiations’ but not enough action that backed up all that talk. As an aside, I also had the realization that this aspect of ‘all bark and no bite’ is probably the reason I did not pursue ordination any further.” [viii] By keeping the focus on white spirituality, the drafters of Authentic Diversity would in effect discourage the ordination of people of color and thereby perpetuate an all-white clergy.

[24] Now, let us turn this around. Let us ask: what should we—“we” includes all people of color and all people dubbed “white”—do together?

#### SEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAKING AUTHENTIC DIVERSITY WORK

[25] **I. Grow Awareness.** As part of our growth in awareness, we need to recognize that the category, *People of Color*, is a construction to distinguish white people from non-white people. This particular construction creates categories that, like the wrong sized shoes, don’t fit. *People of Color* is a category invented to help in the construction of its counter category, white people. Therefore, we should dig up our buried awareness: individuals and groups within the category *People of Color* can and do see things differently—even disagree with one another—and wish for an array of different things. We should not allow our distinctiveness to get lost in the blurry blah category of color.

[26] Similarly, we should be aware that white people are not just white. They represent multiple histories and multiple traditions. And as individuals they do not see things from a single point of view. Except, of course, when they think of themselves as white. Let’s try to crack and even shatter that category: white.

[27] II. **Spiritual Healing One: Be Careful of Feelings.** Do not under any circumstances praise a white liberal Lutheran who cries crocodile tears when confessing his or her sin of racism. If that white liberal Lutheran requests that you verbally flagellate him or her for complicity in racial injustice, keep quiet. Do not grant this request. Deny it. Why? To scold a white Lutheran to such a degree that he or she feels worse than dog poop only reinforces the unhappy consciousness. Condemning an unhappy consciousness will only make such a fragile soul feel victorious in spirituality; and he or she will cast off any further responsibility for seeking out the needs of non-white neighbors within this holy communion. If we deny this fragile soul the sense of self-righteousness attainable through verbal self-flagellation, he or she might feel compelled to seek out justification from God's grace. Not a bad idea, come to think about it.

[28] Much of what we are addressing here lurks in the shadows of feeling, not reason. If a white liberal Lutheran asks that you—if you happen to be a person of color—verbally flagellate him or her with denunciations of the sin of racism, then say this: “When you make me serve your white spiritual privilege, I feel excluded. I feel that our church belongs only to you, and not to me.” Nothing could be more devastating. This will break that fragile soul into more pieces than Humpty Dumpty.

[29] Be aware that some African Americans are not ready to flog white progressives. They have cynically liberated themselves from servitude to white-centered spirituality. Writing in the *Atlantic*, John McWhorter says, “I neither need nor want anyone to muse on how whiteness privileges them over me. Nor do I need wider society to undergo teachings on how to be exquisitely sensitive about my feelings.”<sup>[ix]</sup>

[30] Nothing could destroy the self-image of an ELCA white fragile soul more devastatingly than for a person of color to say: “I don’t want to share my feelings with you.”

[31] Despite this, I recommend that all of us within the ELCA attend to the feelings of those excluded from the white center. But, the white center will have to ask people of color about those feelings, it seems to me.



[32] **III. Spiritual Healing Two: Invite Everyone to the Table.** Yes, the Authentic Diversity strategy yearns for previously muffled voices to be heard in the ELCA. Unfortunately, the perpetuation of white-centered spirituality will keep those peripheral voices muffled, even if they are sitting around a shared table.

[33] Referring to the antiracist ELCA in-group, “They only talk to themselves,” observes Dr. Carl Peterson, a Lutheran of African Descent and member at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Upper Arlington, Ohio. White-centrism “is not helpful or meaningful for moving forward to overcoming their institutional racism. To take meaningful action, they must study and understand the root causes for the racism by talking to people of color. And then ask: how do we correct or remove these causal sources.” [x] Dr. Peterson feels excluded from the unhappy consciousness of the fragile white soul. Can we turn this sense of exclusion into a strength? At least temporarily?

[34] **IV. Spiritual Healing Three: Metanoia for the Fragile Soul.** The ELCA needs spiritual healing, to be sure; but not the spiritual healing prescribed by the Authentic Diversity document. We need a metanoia on the part of white fragile souls that abandons the unhappy consciousness in exchange for pragmatic steps forward, especially the inclusion of previously unheard voices who voice their own needs, expectations, and hopes.

[35] The metanoia or turn-around regarding racial prejudice already took place when the ELCA was founded in 1988, at least officially speaking. Residual prejudice may remain in individuals, to be sure; but the problem today is institutional racism. To resolve this problem, the metanoia we need is for the white-privileged-center of the ELCA to repent from its spiritual narcissism and open itself to treating those it calls “people of color” as full partners.

[36] If our holy communion is to leap over the hurdle of institutional racism, we need to tie the laces on our pragmatic running shoes. “We are not sure what is the most pragmatic path to this loving service,” observes *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* editor, Jenifer Hockenberry.[xi] Rather than run around incessantly in the

chest-beating circles of the unhappy consciousness, editor Hockenberry is leading us on the right track toward practical policy and perhaps personnel changes.

[37] Such a pragmatic step is already recommended and partially implemented in Authentic Diversity: “create a task force entirely of persons of color from regions and synods across the country, so that views and voices of this church so often unheard or unheeded might benefit the whole church.” Further, Authentic Diversity’s recommendations to enhance the TEEM program and parallel efforts to install diversity in parish ministry and administrative ranks are good examples of this pragmatic emphasis.

[38] **V. Treat racism as its own problem. Retain the category *People of Color*, at least temporarily.** We should not admit into the ranks of *People of Color* white women or white LGBTQIA+ friends and fellow travelers.

[39] Why? While it is important to consider intersectionality and how women of color, and LGBTQIA+ people of color experience racism in unique ways, it is important to focus some effort specifically on race. Issues surrounding the place and role of women and LGBTQIA+ persons within the ELCA are important in themselves. I simply recommend that they be kept separate from the issue of racism. By trying to satisfy two or more agendas at the same time, strength of focus will get lost.

[40] As long as the category, *People of Color*, has been constructed, draw upon the strength of its identity. Keep membership tight. As soon as possible, jettison it.[\[xii\]](#)

[41] **VI. Avoid Anti-Racism Training.** According to the ELCA strategy document, “ELCA synods, seminaries, colleges, and universities to require their staff and rostered ministers to participate in antiracism training...” People of Color should boycott these events and deny the white power structure its self-legitimization. Non-white presence at such training events would silently ratify this narcissistic spiritual habit. I recommend that people of color stay away. Just say “no.”



[42] Before we proceed, let me make it clear that my objection to antiracism training in no way endorses former President Donald J. Trump's position on this matter.<sup>[xiii]</sup> My concern is completely independent. I wish to combat overt and covert white supremacy in all its forms; and I say so categorically without compromise. The problem with antiracism training in the church setting is that it backfires; it actually reinforces white-centrism.

[43] Despite the name, *antiracism* workshops do not deal with racism. They only re-wallow in the history and dynamics of prejudice and its resulting injustice. The people of color invited to these workshops pay their dues by distancing themselves from the guilty whites in attendance which, paradoxically, both pains the whites and delights the whites. Ironically, the person of color becomes excluded from this internal spiritual contortion.

[44] The net product of an antiracism training event is institutional racism. At an event that could be a very precious moment of spiritual unity, the person of color becomes the servant to distinctively white spiritual privilege and ceases to share in the communion.

[45] BACKGROUND. The very day I arrived to become a professor at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS) in 1978, my faculty was by coincidence engaged in an antiracism seminar. When I retired after four decades of teaching, PLTS was even more racist—measured by number and proportion of African American students—than when I'd begun. Not prejudiced. Racist.

[46] I initially felt proud to be a member of a multi-racial faculty committed to overcoming prejudice and racism. I regularly team-taught liberation theology with a black faculty colleague. The entire institution of PLTS got on board with the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa in the 1980s. The institution divested and supported international efforts for racial justice; and it did so with admirable authenticity and commitment. Apartheid fell in the mid-1990s. We rejoiced. However, PLTS could not and did not find a way to establish authentic connections with communities that could have benefitted: local and international Chinese Christians, Korean Christians, Spanish speaking churches, or African Americans. My

diagnosis? Not prejudice. Rather, it is the unhappy consciousness. White-centrism took over, reinforcing institutional racism through verbal self-flagellation.

[47] Antiracism workshops continued at PLTS sporadically and then regularly, all *incurvatus in se*. During one such campus antiracism workshop a black woman student ran out actually screaming. Yes, screaming. I asked her what might be wrong. She exclaimed, “I just want to belong. I just want to belong. And they won’t let me.” Here is the point: after four decades of conscientious battling against racial prejudice, this ELCA institution remains a racist institution.

[48] Again, my friends, do not trust the teary-eyed white progressive who thanks you for making him or her feel badly about racism. Er, ah, I mean, prejudice. Antiracism workshops, to borrow from Karl Marx, are the opiate which lulls us into maintaining white-centrism.

**[49] VII. Lead the ELCA beyond institutional racism by acknowledging the specific needs of specific communities.** After rejecting the white-centered spirituality of our fragile souls, this is the most important piece of advice I offer here: *ask the People of Color what is needed to go forward.*

[50] Pastor Lenny Duncan provides a great start on this. See his videos on the question, “Do Black Churches Matter in the ELCA?”[\[xiv\]](#)

[51] Instead of directing attention to the unhappy consciousness of white Lutherans as a single monolith, we must direct our attention to the actual needs of those within the ELCA and outside the ELCA in our neighborhoods. Send emissaries out of the synod office and out of the institution into the neighborhoods and ask just what needs could be met or opportunities facilitated by the ELCA to immigrants, Chinese communities, Korean communities, Mexican communities, African American communities, the homeless. To be authentic, we must allow ourselves to get to know each community and person for who they are. They are not just “they,” not just “other”, not just *People of Color!*.



[52] Back within the ELCA, we should try to understand the actual spiritual and cultural needs of each sub-tradition within the Lutheran communion, regardless of race. Try to understand why there is a rivalry between Norwegians and Swedes, between rural and urban, between organ music and praise bands. Try to understand just how African Americans feel about the tensions they experience arising from brutal law enforcement, privatized prisons, loss of health care, and the vicissitudes of ordinary family life. Try to understand how Indian Lutherans, Chinese Lutherans, and Latinx Lutherans take differing perspectives on multiple matters. And try to understand empathetically just what occupies the attention of others on the periphery of the ELCA. The way to discern those needs, expectations, and hopes is to ask.

[53] Angela T. !Khabeb, pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, shines a light unto our path ahead. "We need the Spirit to blow through our nation as a mighty rushing wind, purging it of systemic racism and white supremacy. This is the work of the church."[xv]

#### Notes:

[i] "How Strategic and Authentic is Our Diversity: A Call for Confession, Reflection and Healing Action," adopted by the fifteenth triennial Churchwide Assembly on August 9, 2019 at Milwaukee, Wisconsin; [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy\\_Toward\\_Authentic\\_Diversity.pdf?\\_ga=2.268667378.2061013074.1595792543-301935741.1595430762](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy_Toward_Authentic_Diversity.pdf?_ga=2.268667378.2061013074.1595792543-301935741.1595430762) .

[ii] One's consciousness "feels itself in the bitterness of soul-diremption. It is the movement of an infinite yearning..a yearning [for what] is the unattainable 'beyond' which, in being seized, escapes or rather has already escaped." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind: The Unhappy Consciousness*. [http://www.stjohnschs.org/general\\_studies/philosophy/Romantic/hegel.html](http://www.stjohnschs.org/general_studies/philosophy/Romantic/hegel.html).

[iii] “The healthy or robust soul, in contrast, fuels a self like a log fuels a roaring flame. The healthy soul, in contrast to the fragile soul, lives out of *theonomy* (God, *theos*, with *nomos*). Theonomy looks like autonomy (being a law unto oneself, *auto*); but the center of the autonomous self in this case is rooted in the center of ultimate reality, God. The log here is God’s log, an everlasting source of spiritual, psychic, and even physical fuel for life. As we said just above: a healthy soul is centered in the divine center; and this shared centering comes to us as a gift of God’s grace.” Ted Peters, *Sin Boldly!* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015) 22.

[iv] Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” tr., Timothy J. Wengert, *The Annotated Luther* eds., Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna, and Timothy J. Wengert (6 Volumes: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015-2019) 1:467-538, at 530.

[v] “At its best, Luther’s conception of neighbor-centered Christian freedom suggests that we no longer need to live lives obsessed with our own failings and imperfections. That we are freed up to turn outward, toward our neighbors in love, that our lives are lived in community with and for others—these expressions of wild space help us pay closer attention to the precarities that often prevail in subaltern contexts.” Deanna A. Thompson, “Wild Spaces of Neighbor-Centered Christian Freedom in Subaltern Contexts of Gender, Race, and Illness,” *The Alternative Luther: Lutheran Theology from the Subaltern*, ed., Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen (Lanham and Minneapolis: Lexington and Fortress, 2019) 157-172, at 168.

[vi] The document includes a phrase, “personal woundedness perpetuated by racism and racial prejudice,” indicating that the difference is acknowledged. Further, “The ELCA recognizes the perpetuation of racism still exists within the denomination despite personal good intentions.” This would suggest engaging the racism, not the personal good intentions. Nevertheless, the document ignores racism and prescribes a strategy to invest resources on the good intentions. Here is the confusion illustrated: to counter “the deep and pervasive wound of racism...Our church must fully engage in a *metanoia* movement—a change of heart and mind—that will, in partnership with the gospel, generate redemptive recognition, restorative justice, and the conscious development of capacity for



healing.” This is a marvelously inspiring aspiration. Yet, it’s like a wrench that does not fit the bolt. We traversed the metanoia movement in 1987. The problem in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is institutional racism. Returning to 1987 amounts to a diversion of resources.

[vii] “Racial biases not only occur in individuals, but are also embedded in our institutions—what sociologists refer to as ‘structural’ or ‘systemic’ racism....Systemic racism refers to the well documented fact that most of our institutions—in politics, law, education, and health care, to name a few—are fundamentally organized according to assumptions and policies that work to the disadvantage of communities of color and Blacks in particular....None of these policies is necessarily the result of individual intent, overt bias, or malice.” Adia Harvey Wingfield, “Systemic racism persists in the sciences,” *Science* 369:6502 (24 July 2020) 351.

[viii] Personal communication.

[ix] John McWhorter, “The Dehumanizing Condescension of *White Fragility*. *The Atlantic* (July 15, 2020); <https://www.theatlantic.com/author/john-mcwhorter/>

[x] Personal communication.

[xi] Jennifer Hockenberry Dragseth, “A Note from the Editor: June/July 2020; <https://elca.org/JLE/Articles/1328>.

[xii] This is a principle borrowed from Saul Alinsky who in turn borrowed it from Heraclitus. If white people think you are a person of color, then own it and turn it into a power vector. In every other context, forget it.

[xiii] “Executive Order 13950 – Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping,” <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ofccp/faqs/executive-order-13950>; Jacob Knutson, “Trump pushes to expand ban against anti-racism training to federal contractors,” *Axios* (September 23, 2020); <https://www.axios.com/trump-discrimination-training-federal-contractors-63b3515d-9720-4d53-abfd-530262f9f9b8.html>

[xiv] “Do Black Churches Matter in the ELCA?”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtD41cytL9Q>

[xv] Angela T. !Khabeb, “Fire in my bones: A reflection on the Floyd protests and unrest in Minneapolis,” *Living Lutheran* 5:4 (August 2020) 12.



### **Ted Peters**

Ted Peters is Emeritus Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. See his website for more resources: **[TedsTimelyTake.com](https://www.tedsTimelyTake.com)**.



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Priscilla Paris-Austin and Elizabeth Rawlings, “A Clarifying response to the Journal of Lutheran Ethics and Ted Peters regarding the ELCA Strategy Towards Authentic Diversity, *Disrupt Worship* (Lent 2021);

<https://www.disruptworshipproject.com/blog/> ;

<https://learn.elca.org/jle/a-clarifying-response-about-the-elca-strategy-towards-authentic-diversity/> .

## A clarifying response to the Journal of Lutheran Ethics and Ted Peters regarding the ELCA Strategy Towards Authentic Diversity

Blog Post

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2021



*Members of the Task Force for the Strategy for Authentic Diversity gathered at the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. Photo by Rev. Priscilla Paris-Austin.*

**co-authored by Rev. Priscilla Paris-Austin and Rev. Elizabeth Rawlings**

In its February 2021 Issue, during Black History Month, in time when the United States is going through yet another period of racial reckoning, The Journal of Lutheran Ethics (JLE) published three articles under the collective theme of Racism, Justice, and Mercy. Each essay was written by a white man; none of them were written by anyone who is Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color (BIPOC) or who has prior academic interest in or study of race, racial justice, or liberation theology. This was a grave, injurious mistake on the part of the editorial board who should issue a full and public apology before soliciting papers by BIPOC Lutherans that address the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) work facing its history of white supremacy and racism. It also should not go without response.

Together, the authors of this response, Rev. Priscilla Paris-Austin (MDiv, LSTC) [1] and Rev. Elizabeth Rawlings (MA, LSTC: MDiv, PLTS)[2], have more than 40 years combined experience "on the ground" in racial justice work on behalf of the ELCA. Most notably for our response here, Rev. Paris-Austin served on the national team that developed the Strategy Towards Authentic Diversity (STAD) document, continues to serve on the Advisory Team to the Church Council regarding the document, Rev. Rawlings serves on the board of the European Descent Lutheran Association for Racial Justice, and they both serve the NW Washington Synod STAD team.



While there are reasons to address each of the pieces in the recent issue of JLE, we will focus our comments on Dr. Ted Peters's essay, "Overcoming ELCA Racism with Authentic Diversity." We want to hold Peters and JLE accountable for the false assumptions, inaccuracies and misrepresentations presented in his paper, to deconstruct the mythology of reverse racism and inaccurate statements about race and culture that prop up his paper and to call for engagement with the actual work of the Strategy Towards Authentic Diversity.

Peters states at the outset of his essay that he has two recommendations: "(1) we should cease feeding the unhappy consciousness of the ELCA white leadership and remove this white leadership from the center of our spiritual attention and (2) we should ask people of color...about what they need and would like to see happen in the ELCA." His subsequent discussion focuses primarily on the document, "How Strategic and Authentic is our Diversity: A Call for Confession, Reflection and Healing Action," a product of the Task Force for the Strategy Towards Authentic Diversity (STAD).

As such, we would like to begin with the largest problem with this paper: it is built on a fundamental misrepresentation of the Strategy Towards Authentic Diversity (STAD). Dr. Peters repeatedly asserts that the voices of "People of Color" should have been included in the creation of the document and that we need to listen more to "People of Color." In fact, per the directive of the resolution[3] which formed the Task Force that created the document, it was written and shepherded by a team of 18+ rostered and lay leaders of color from across the ELCA. In fact, there was representation from every Ethnic Specific Association, each of the 9 regions, every expression of the church (congregational, synodical & churchwide), as well as relevant ELCA affiliated organizations. The collaborative process of the document's creation included, per the direction of the resolution, engagement with the various divisions of churchwide, and the Conference of Bishops.[4]

While the European Descent Lutheran Association for Racial Justice (EDLARJ) was also included in the conversation, their input was limited to the final editing phase and they actively deferred to the judgment of the leaders of color. The Background Summary provided in the document clearly states the resolution created, "a Task Force for Strategic Authentic Diversity composed entirely of people of color (African Descent, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian and Pacific Islander, Arab and Middle Eastern, Latino) and inclusive of immigrant and LGBTQIA+ identities." [5]

Peters writes as though there were few concrete, actionable suggestions contained within STAD. He repeatedly calls for practical changes and laments

self-flagellation and centering white people's feelings, but only once in 53 paragraphs (paragraph 37) does he refer to the concrete recommendations found on pp. 11-16 of STAD. In fact, STAD consists almost entirely of concrete, substantive changes at all levels of the church. Specifically, the document offers recommendations in four areas: Healing (Urging Reflection, Awareness and Training for rostered leaders, synods, seminaries, colleges and the churchwide organization[6]), Structural Accountability (twelve recommendations including the directing of resources, the creation of an officer for Diversity Equity and Inclusion, and monitoring of "the duration of the call process for people of color, particularly women of color"[7]), Theological Education and Leadership (fourteen recommendations including antiracism training for supervisors for internship and ministry in context and contextual education directors, and the creation of "a database of rostered and lay leaders of color to create an effective networking platform"[8]), and Partnership with Full Communion, Ecumenical, and Interreligious Partners and Related Organizations (ten recommendations directing churchwide to review racial audits occurring with partners, giving direction to congregations and synods on where to find resources through partner organizations and requiring documentation of authentic diversity representation on organizational boards[9]).

The other subject Peters returns to repeatedly is his idea of "unhappy consciousness" which Peters defines as, "a spiritual mindset that feels good when feeling miserable." He purports this mindset is the main motivation behind the anti-racism work of the leadership of the ELCA and that this mindset is what propelled those leaders to create STAD (par. 8). The latter, as already stated, is demonstrably false as STAD was created not by white leadership in the ELCA, but by BIPOC leaders who are working to call the ELCA into a just, equitable way of doing God's work in this world. To state the document is a result of a desire to "self-flagellate" is a direct contradiction to the stated spirit of the document: "The spirit and intent of the document are to help us transcend the paralysis of guilt and blaming and reach a shared accountability and honest relational engagement in the body of Christ." [10,11]

Peters provides no evidence that STAD was created out of a desire to self-flagellate or that ELCA leadership feels good when whipping themselves with the sin of racism; he is basing a rather large part of his thesis on an assumption. White guilt is certainly a stumbling block to anti-racism work, as is the habit white people have of centering themselves and their needs while pushing the needs of BIPOC to the side. However, there is no evidence that white guilt or white-centering is the motivation for the ELCA addressing its institutional racism, or for asking members to address their own racist beliefs



and behaviors. It is an incontrovertible fact that the ELCA has done, and continues to do, great harm to its BIPOC members and BIPOC people writ large, from our predecessor bodies funding of Indian Boarding schools [12] and their overt and covert support of slavery [13], to chronically underfunding BIPOC churches and leaders today. To make confession of these things is to recognize harm done and ask for forgiveness. The call to confess and repent of our institutional and individual racism does not indicate the ELCA leadership is doing anything more than recognizing historical and continued harm and asking for forgiveness, as we are commanded to do by Jesus in scripture and taught by Martin Luther in the Augsburg Confession and other writings.

It appears as though Peters conflates repeated calls to confession with “unhappy consciousness” [14]. We do not agree that the Strategy for Authentic Diversity itself or the calls to confession within the document and issued by our churchwide structure perpetuate the spiritual mindset he calls, “unhappy consciousness” (par 5). Nor is it, as he asserts, a way that “white progressives can keep obsessing about their own failings and perfections” (par 9). Is confessing our sins in church on a weekly basis somehow a demonstration of feeling good when we are wallowing? Should we stop this practice in the event some may be getting stuck in guilt rather than turning around to live a new life? Luther recognized our sinful nature and our continual need to confess so that, through God’s forgiveness, we might be opened up to God’s grace. In the Lutheran tradition, confession is not meant as a method of self-flagellation, rather something that is, “lovely and comforting [15],” because of the work that God does in us when God forgives us.

It is true that confession often does not lead people to a lovely and comforting feeling. If we are still burdened by our sins against our neighbor, Martin Luther suggests confessing our sins to the person we have harmed [16]. However, concerning racism in our time and place, this runs into two problems. The first is that this puts an unnecessary and painful burden on BIPOC who are forced to hear these confessions over and over again and who may not be ready or willing to forgive. The second is that white people’s sin of racism is not a sin against one person, rather it is a sin against groups of people. This would place the kind of confession suggested by the ELCA in a spot in-between Luther’s belief that we should confess publicly to have our hearts broken open to God’s grace through forgiveness and that we should confess privately for a personal relief from our burdens.

While through the act of forgiveness we experience God’s grace, and are, ideally, driven to good works in response to God’s grace, we continue to call

for confession because those of us who are white continue to act in ways that uphold racist systems because we benefit from those racist systems. White people continue to hold beliefs and live in the world in ways that cause harm to BIPOC people and ourselves. Our structures continue to be racist. The matter is not, as Peters states, “already settled” (par 13). We must continue to confess these sins so long as we continue to commit them. The church calls us to confess these sins because many of us confess with our words but not with our hearts; we have not yet reached a point of true contrition, whereby God’s grace shines upon us and we move forward doing good works (in this case, being actively anti-racist) as a response to the experience of God’s grace.

Now that we have addressed the two major, problematic, assumptions that undergird Peter’s work, we will address the problematic racism that lies within. Paragraphs 10 and 11 of his paper attempt to define prejudice and racism, but, instead, show a lack of understanding of racism. Peters seems to only understand racism as an institutional issue and prejudice as interpersonal behavior (par 10). In addition, he seems to believe that it is possible for people to be completely rid of prejudice (par 11). Institutional racism is one of many dimensions of racism, in addition to interpersonal and systemic. White individuals can be, and are, racist, by virtue of being born into a society that consistently glorifies whiteness.

In addition to his inaccurate definitions of racism and prejudice as well as confusing uses of the terms, Peters uses the term, “white racism.” Use of this term implies that there are other kinds of racism distinct from the racism perpetrated by white people. While there are other kinds of race based prejudice, racism requires a level of structural power that is solely held by white people. In his work, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Dr. James Cone address the idea of “Black racism” thusly:

Black racism is a myth created by whites to ease their guilt feelings. As long as whites can be assured blacks are racists, they can find reasons to justify their own oppression of black people. This tactic seems to be a favorite device of white liberals who, intrigued by their own unselfish involvement in civil rights for the “Negro,” like to pride themselves on their liberality toward blacks. White racists who are prepared to defend the outright subjugation of blacks need no such myth. The myth is needed by those who intend to keep things as they are, while pretending that things are in fact progressing. When confronted with the fact that the so called progress is actually nonexistent, they can easily offer an explanation by pointing to the “white backlash” caused by “black racism.” [17]



There is no moderating term required for racism. As Dr. Cone states, white people create other kinds of racism in order to deflect from their own racism, but there is only one kind of racism, and that is the kind which is perpetuated by whites.

Peters appears to object to the entire category of whiteness by virtue of the fact that it is an unstable category. For certain, the category of who is white has evolved throughout the history of the United States, but it has its roots in Christians working to justify Black enslavement.[18] Beginning in the 1500's, Europeans who desired to kidnap and sell or purchase other humans began to create theories of racial hierarchy with the lightest skinned at the top and those with the darkest skin on the bottom — these earliest theories were created by manipulating Christian scripture or creating extra-Biblical narratives out of thin air. By the mid-1600's, this racial hierarchy had solidified as noted by Morgan Goodwin who noted racist planters had made “‘those two words, Negro and Slave’ synonymous, while “White” was ‘the general name for Europeans.’”[19] Over our national history, various peoples have been brought into the category of white to stand in opposition to the “other,” those who are to be kept in their place, without political or economic power.

Dr. Peters argues against the use of whiteness as a category through a graphic demonstrating what (we assume) he believes is the ethnic diversity of the ELCA. He demonstrates a misunderstanding of the concept of whiteness and how it is used to reinforce structural racism. Peters is not wrong to suggest that the ELCA is ethnically diverse. While there is overlap between race and ethnicity, they are both social constructs used to organize people, but they are not the same thing.

Race has elements of power and hierarchy and is something that is generally assigned a person by the society around them in order to reinforce that society's power structure. Many of the qualities that are generally associated with a particular race have been assigned by those who hold power in a society; those characteristics are not generally embraced by the members of the race. Ethnicity, “focuses attention on differences in meanings, values and ways of living (social practices) that are often regarded as equally viable and do not establish a status ranking among the groups.”[20] People often claim their own ethnicity, rather than it being externally imposed, and are generally willing to claim these differences in social practices. Ethnic identity has more of a focus on how people within the group define themselves and racial identity

has more of a focus on how people outside of the race think about people who

has more of a focus on how people outside of the race think about people who have been categorized as being within that race.

In his effort to discuss the diversity of the ELCA, Peters carefully delineates the many European nations ELCA members descend from (graphic following par. 14). He then relegates the rest of the world to continentally-based ethnic groups. There is not the same respect for, or knowledge of, the strong Lutheran communities in Tanzania, Madagascar, Palestine, or Indonesia as there is for the communities our members descend from in Europe. Here, Peters is showing how he applies value to certain Lutherans over others, and reflecting a much greater problem in the wider ELCA. Throughout the ELCA, these European nations from which many Lutheran descend receive far more respect and analysis than Lutherans from other continents. This diversity of people from European nations, or all of the languages, cultures, and peoples represented within the ELCA, does not make the ELCA racially diverse[21], (e.g Lots of people who descended from Scandanavian Lutherans are still a lot of white Lutherans). Racial diversity, not diversity of nation of descent, is the goal that was addressed (however poorly) by the ELCA in 1987 and is the primary diversity STAD is working to address today [22].

One final point we would like to address is Peters wholesale dismissal of Anti-Racism trainings. There is a necessary conversation to be had about effective Anti-Racism training and whether BIPOC should be required to attend such trainings given the pain they often experience as a result. The ELCA and its subsidiaries too often rely on organizations with which they have had a long standing relationship, many of which engage models of Anti-Racism training that are not effective. This is by no means a reason to throw out the concept as a whole. There are many local and national organizations and individuals that do effective, culturally sensitive and trauma informed Anti-Racism trainings. The STAD document is intentional about including Anti-Racism Training in its recommendations for the church as an entry point for Healing, and as a way forward with accountability. Within the document there are suggestions of resources [23] and recommendations with specific guidelines that address the named concerns and therefore would strengthen Anti-Racism trainings across the ELCA. [24]

Whether Dr. Peters intentionally disregarded the voices of the leaders of color behind the document or did so inadvertently, his dismissal of their work is a distraction from the work to which the document calls us as individuals, congregations, synods, colleges, seminaries, and as a whole ELCA. In the words of Toni Morrison:

■ The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you



the function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing. [25]

The action of the JLE editorial board in printing the essay by Ted Peters without a review of its foundational accuracy is one such distraction. This essay is an excellent example of a “liberal” white male trying very hard to declare he is not racist while upholding white supremacy. This is a problem in society in general, but in academia in particular, as white people talk about racism and white supremacy without actually doing their own internal work on their own racism or doing the appropriate amount of external work to research the issue at hand. For too long, white people, white men in particular, have simply been taken at their word on matters of race, while BIPOC are questioned at every turn. The ability to make statements without citations and reference one’s own work with the assumption that the reader will know what the author means is an ability afforded only to white men in academia. This issue of JLE, and Dr. Peters article, in particular, are prime examples of this.

Unfortunately, this distraction has served its purpose in redirecting the energy and time of the BIPOC leaders who wrote the document, the BIPOC leaders on the Advisory Team for the document and the authors of this response. Until the Journal of Lutheran Ethics issues a public apology and full retraction of the erroneous article there is little hope for change. But that distraction ends here, as we refocus ourselves now on the task at hand and close this essay with the words of the document that has caused such disruption.

As siblings in Christ, baptized into the priesthood of all believers, we must hold one another accountable in confession and repentance. Racism may affect each of us differently, but we must take responsibility for our participation, acknowledge our complicity, repent of our sin, move toward restoration, and pray to God for reconciliation. [26]

**ELCA Strategy for Authentic Diversity**

 **Tweet**

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## Endnotes

1. Rev. Priscilla Paris Austin is pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA) in the South

Lake Union neighborhood of Seattle, a congregation that takes seriously their calling to be a Sanctuary that is Open and Affirming of all persons of every gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, age, and status. Their commitment to being actively antiracist has encouraged them to be the fiscal sponsor for the emerging #66th Synod Reparations Fund, of which Priscilla (aka Nakia) is a member of the founding board. Her calling has her serving as a member of the Faith Leaders Action Group (a rapid response team of interfaith leaders in the Seattle metro area), the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion board for her children's school, as well as being an active participant in various faith based advocacy and action groups locally and nationally, while writing for organizations that are part and apart from the institutional church.

2. Rev. Elizabeth Rawlings, is a queer, white ELCA pastor who recieved an MA in Church in Society from The Lutheran Theology of Chicago, which she then transferred to Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary to obtain a Master of Divinity. She has been doing racial justice work for over 20 years, serves as a member of the Northwest Washington Synod's Strategy for Authentic Diversity working group, is on the board for the European Descent Lutheran Association for Racial Justice, and is founder and co-conspirator for Disrupt Worship Project, a liturgical resource for those who wish to engage justice in their sermons and liturgy.

3. "RESOLVED that the Task Force be composed of one person from each of the nine regions and one Bishop who will serve as co-chair. The composition of the Task Force shall conform with the representational principles in section 5.01.f of the ELCA Constitution except that persons of Color and/or persons whose Primary Language is other than English shall comprise 100% of the Task Force and the Task Force shall be ethnically diverse. The members of the Task Force shall be appointed by the Church Council in consultation with the ELCA Director of Ethnic Specific and Multicultural Ministries" Motion B, Resolution for a Strategy Towards Authentic Diversity within the ELCA, 2016 Pre-Assembly Report: Report of the Reference and Counsel Committee, Section IX, p. 1-3.

4. The work of the Task Force shall include but is not limited to:

5. "In response to the proposal, a resolution was presented to the assembly and adopted to create a Task Force for Strategic Authentic Diversity composed entirely of people of color (African Descent, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian and Pacific Islander, Arab and Middle Eastern, Latino) and inclusive of immigrant and LGBTQIA+ identities.

6. Ibid p. 11

7. Ibid 12-13

8. Ibid p 14

9. Ibid p 16

10. Ibid p. 3

11. Ibid p. 4 – Additionally, in defining Authentic Diversity, the document further states the motivation and purpose as "the work of this task force is rooted not in charity or pity but in resistance to tokenism and the nominal representation of cultures in ELCA structures. We work toward seeing a fuller glimpse of God's image and the fullness of God's creation."

12. <http://wigenweb.org/shawano/BethanyIndianMission.html>

13. [http://thecresset.org/2008/Trinity2008/Chapman\\_T2008.html](http://thecresset.org/2008/Trinity2008/Chapman_T2008.html)

14. Unhappy consciousness is a term coined by Hegel, but, after some research, it

appears as though this usage is a reference to Peters' own work. As Dr. Peters did not cite



either Hegel or his own work, we will address this argument based on the definitions and explanations provided in the paper he wrote for JLE.

15. Luther, Martin, "Admonition to Confession (1529)", retrieved from <https://bookofconcord.org/sources-and-context/admonition-to-confession/>

16. Ibid

17. Cone, James H. 1997, Black Theology and Black Power. Maryknoll, NY; Orbis Books [p. 15]

18. Kendi, Ibram X. 2016, Stamped from the Beginning. New York; Nation Books

19. Ibid [p. 51]

20. Markus, H. R. (2010). Who am I?: Race, ethnicity and identity. In H. Markus & P. Moya (Eds.), Doing race: 21 essays for the 21st century. New York: W.W. Norton, pp. 371

21. We would also like to note that the LGBTQIA+ community is included in Dr. Peters graphics that appear to address the ethnic diversity of the ELCA. One of the authors is queer, and as much as she enjoys being recognized as a part of the ELCA, LGBTQIA+ is neither a race nor an ethnicity and should not be included as such.

22. How Strategic and Authentic is our Diversity, p. 7, footnote 18

23. Ibid, p. 10 "We recognize that many of the ELCA's full communion partners struggle with similar histories of inaction and indifference. Many of these partners have recognized and are learning from their past actions, especially concerning authentic diversity. Some denominations and institutions have moved faster than others, yet all have recognized that justice work and partnerships cannot survive in a vacuum. There is a common belief that, to strive for and embody justice, we must commit to working together. This commitment must be made active and tangible through allocation of resources, including people and money. Investing in partnerships with other denominations, institutions, and organizations can prompt a congregation to reassess its views and can create new opportunities to develop training and educational material for youth and children."

24. Ibid, p11, "Such training would intersect with issues of gender, sexuality, class, ability, naturalization status, etc. in a way that is holistic, comprehensive, and mutual.

25. Portland State University; Morrison, Toni; St. John, Primus; Callahan, John; Callahan, Judy; and Baker, Lloyd, "'Black Studies Center public dialogue. Pt. 2'" (1975). Special Collections: Oregon Public Speakers. 90. <http://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/11309>

26. How strategic is our Diversity, p. 6.

Category: Blog Post March 9, 2021

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Abraham Allende, "Letter from the ELCA Authentic Diversity Advisory Team," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 20:2 (February 2021); <https://learn.elca.org/jle/5401-2/>

## Letter from the ELCA Authentic Diversity Advisory Team

FROM: ELCA Authentic Diversity Advisory Team

TO: Dr. Jennifer Hockenbery

Journal of Lutheran Ethics, Editor February 18, 2021

Dear Dr. Hockenbery,

I write on behalf of the **Authentic Diversity Advisory Team**, many of whom also served on the task force that developed the *Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity* which was overwhelmingly adopted by an 855-13 vote of the 2019 Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee in August of 2019.

Words cannot express the depth of disappointment felt by the members of the task force after reading the article, "Overcoming ELCA Racism with Authentic Diversity," written by Ted Peters, that appeared in the February issue of the Journal of Lutheran Ethics critiquing the Authentic Diversity Strategy and calling for its redrafting.

To address each of his arguments point by point would make this an intolerably lengthy response, so let me try to be concise. We found the article offensive, demeaning and dismissive of the work of the dedicated servants who labored assiduously over two years to draft and develop a document that raised questions, made recommendations, and encouraged, as well as challenged the ELCA to not only envision, but hold itself accountable to create an authentically diverse church in all three of its expressions.

Those who gave of their valuable time to this effort represent people of color from various ethnicities, races, languages, academic backgrounds, and all units and levels of the church; people whose voices have been systematically marginalized throughout the history of the ELCA. The ELCA Church Council established the makeup of this forum intentionally to give us that voice. It is important to point this out because Peters, in his article, offers the specific advice to, "ask people of color what is needed to go forward." To this I respond, who are we, if not people of color?

The overall tone of Dr. Peters' article was presumptive, arrogant, and demonstrated the very issue that the Strategy addresses, that of white privilege – a privilege that renders it deaf to the suggestions and recommendations made within our document. It was evident to our Advisory Team that the author either hadn't read the Strategy in its entirety, or chose to selectively ignore its contents so as to promote his own ideas and theories. In

### Author

Abraham Allende

(/jle/article\_authors/abraham-allende)

### Issue

Journal of Lutheran Ethics

April 2021: Lutheran

Ethicists' Gathering Part 1

(Volume 21 Issue 2)

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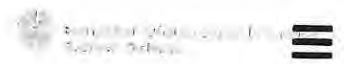
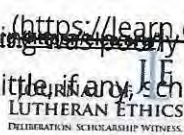
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(/jle/category/uncategorized)

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our judgment, his reasoning is poorly presented, full of false and often contradictory arguments; and showed little if any scholarly research into the viewpoints of our document.



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It is also important that the JLE's editorial board be called to task for its lack of oversight and accountability in allowing this article to be published without asking for the opinions of the *Strategy's* developers. According to your own "Editor's Introduction," Ted Peters' draft was received in plenty of time to have reached out to any of the members of our task force for a response. We are not invisible nor unknown to many in the ELCA Churchwide offices. A simple phone call or email to a staff person would have put you in touch with any of us long before publication deadline.

It is incomprehensible to us that an issue addressing racism would not include, at the very least, ONE article authored by a person who represents the community affected by that racism. Your omission demonstrates the very point our Strategy addresses. Pointing out all these glaring exclusions is exhausting.

As we approach the season of Lent, which calls us all to repentance and renewal, I pray that our journey to the cross and reconciliation in Christ lead us to a clearer vision of our common humanity and a greater awareness that we are all creatures created by God and loved in equal measure. May this time of reflection give us a greater appreciation of each other.

In Christ,

The Rev. Abraham D. Allende

Authentic Diversity Advisory Team, Co-Convener

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#### ( ) **Abraham Allende ( )**

Abraham Allende recently retired as Bishop of the Northeastern Ohio Synod. He serves as Co-Convener of the Authentic Diversity Advisory Team.

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## EDITORIAL

Ted Peters, "Apologies to the authentic diversity advisory team,"  
*Dialog* 60:2 (2021) 1-6; <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12665>.

WILEY

# Apologies to the authentic diversity advisory team

I grieve that I have made a mistake. What I write here addresses the ELCA Authentic Advisory Team with an apology plus a complementary extension to the current discussion.

When I wrote my article, "Overcoming ELCA Racism with Authentic Diversity,"<sup>1</sup> I sought to make one central point: the 2019 ELCA document, "How Strategic and Authentic is our Diversity: A Call for Confession, Reflection, and Healing Action," might perpetuate institutional racism rather than combat it.<sup>2</sup> Because the Authentic Diversity document keeps the white segment of our church in its center with people of color serving the white unhappy consciousness,<sup>3</sup> its strategic plan risks reifying the white versus nonwhite binary that maintains intact our racist practices.

If the ELCA were a patient, I feared, the Authentic Diversity document was operating with a misdiagnosis; and the misdiagnosis would lead to the wrong therapy. The proper therapy, I thought, would be to turn the matter of institutional racism over to persons of color to serve as healers. I thought that we needed to hear the voices of the persons of color.

Much to my chagrin and embarrassment, I have since learned that this is exactly what the ELCA has done. A document I read as a self-serving contrivance of the white establishment turns out to be nothing of the sort. To the Authentic Diversity Advisory Team I offer my humblest apologies.

Authors of color were commissioned by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly and the Church Council to take up the task of designing a strategic plan, and the product is an authentic expression of this drafting group. The very voices I wanted to hear have been heard by our church in assembly, even though my ears have been partially deaf regarding who was saying what. I can now grasp why this precipitated a negative response to my proposals. I'm grieved at my mistake.

Co-convenor of the Authentic Strategy Advisory Team, The Rev. Abraham D. Allende, found my article, "offensive, demeaning and dismissive."<sup>4</sup> This deeply saddens me. I had wrongly thought I would be defending the very people I offended. Again, my heartfelt and humble apologies.

## 1 | WHERE I AM COMING FROM

In the vulgar spate of excoriations that has foamed in the wake of my article, I've been accused of wittingly or unwittingly upholding white supremacy while trying to absolve myself from guilt by seeking membership in the nonwhite caucus. I plan to simply leave this criticism alone without footnote and without comment. At least for the moment.

Perhaps I should mention why race within the ELCA is a matter of passion for me. I was born into a Michigan community that was avowedly prejudiced and racist to the extreme. It sponsored white privilege accompanied by a hideous ideology of white privilege. When I heard Martin Luther King, Jr. speak, at the age of 18, my individual perspective began to change, even while my Lutheran tradition did not begin to change. The Authentic Diversity document nicely cites Dr. King—who bears the name Martin Luther—saying, a beloved community includes "a global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of all the earth." That is my vision too.

Whiteness may be a social construct, to be sure; but in our present situation whiteness stands in contradiction to St. Paul's admonition: "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).

Through adoption and other venues, my then wife, Jenny a Christian school teacher and musician, and I raised children of different races. We enjoyed years as a racially blended family. During the years when my kids were teenagers, five young people represented four different races around the dinner table: Paul, Kathy Kim, Elizabeth, Martin, and Derek. The cajoling and frolicking looked like United Nations in a happy mood. Frankly and perhaps selfishly, I wanted my church to look like this, to be like this.

When my musically talented daughter-of-color, Elizabeth, was preparing college applications, I took her to visit the St. Olaf campus. I was dreaming that she'd make it into the famous St. Olaf Choir. After our visit she said, "I don't want to come here. Everybody's white. Nobody looks like me."<sup>5</sup> My heart sank. My daughter felt out of place in a Lutheran institution. Today she is a committed Christian,



but no longer Lutheran.<sup>6</sup> I have yearned for our ELCA to change so that my children and persons of color could feel that this is their church, their life-giving home.

As reported in the Authentic Diversity strategic plan, "As the ELCA was unable to reach a constitutional goal of 10 percent people of color/and or whose primary language is other than English by 1998, it was removed from the ELCA constitution in 2016." I weep.

There are hundreds of racially blended families in the ELCA. When I look at the Authentic Diversity document, I don't see a place for a racially blended family like mine. I see reified binary assumptions. So I wonder: where will such families like mine fit?

## 2 | RESPONDING TO SELECTED CRITICISMS

I would like to respond to some of the more productive criticisms addressed toward me.

First, the *Unhappy Consciousness*. Priscilla Paris-Austin and Elizabeth Rawlings criticize my article because, "Peters conflates repeated calls to confession with unhappy consciousness."<sup>7</sup> These critics make two additional overlapping points. One is that the document, Authentic Diversity, is not about feeding the insatiable white progressive hunger for self-justification through never-ending confession of guilt. Second, never-ending confession is a good thing, and with the blessings of Martin Luther and the Augsburg Confession we should sustain the confessional apparatus.

After making these two points, these critics acknowledge that our white-centered spirituality can make people of color uncomfortable in two ways. "The first is that this puts an unnecessary and painful burden on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color) who are forced to hear these confessions over and over again and who may not be ready or willing to forgive. The second is that white people's sin of racism is not a sin against one person, rather it is a sin against groups of people."

Let me respond initially to the discomfort persons of color feel when feeding the voracious appetite of the unhappy consciousness. I think I understand what is being said here. What Paris-Austin and Rawlings tell us is very important. It is worth sitting with for a moment to consider.

The point I tried to make in my original article is that people of color within the ELCA should be liberated from this new and very subtle form of spiritual bondage to the white establishment. People of color could choose to remove themselves from the insatiable hunger of white progressive Lutherans who, paradoxically, feel good when feeling miserable. This is a sick spirituality; and to perpet-

uate it would be like spinning tires in a Minnesota snow. These two problems mentioned by Paris-Austin and Rawlings are symptoms of an underlying disease. Our diagnosis should follow up on what Paris-Austin and Rawlings identify as symptoms.

Let me be blunt lest this point be misinterpreted. The white leadership of the ELCA behaves as if our church had been a slave holder and had whipped people of color. Now, people of color have been liberated. So, due to the unhappy consciousness, people of color are being asked to whip their former slave holders. "Please flog us!" Suddenly, people of color are being asked by the white establishment to serve its unhappy consciousness. The Authentic Diversity document responds: "Thanks for asking. Yes, we accept your invitation to flog you, verbally that is."

This practice is like feeding a hot fudge sundae to a diabetic. It simply will not turn out well.

I recommend that this not become the sole or even primary therapy for ELCA racism. If we are in for years of people of color verbally whipping our white racists, nothing else in the ELCA will get done. Our guilt-ridden white spirituality risks creating a monster that will eventually get out of control, and our church community will drop into the same abyss we find in our currently divided nation.

Back to the criticism of my position. Paris-Austin and Rawlings claim that the ELCA document is not about white-centered spirituality. It's about people of color. I wish to counter. When I read the lists of recommendations, nearly every one is directed at white-centered healing, awareness, reflection, training, structural accountability, ecumenical partnerships, and such. Actual strategies for practical outreach toward individuals, families, churches, and communities are disproportionately minimal. How did I misread Authentic Diversity?

A second criticism has to do with Union Seminary Black theologian, the late James Cone. Yes, Cone is correct: the concept of reverse racism is a dust storm kicked up by white prejudice so that white folks hide among the victims. Yes, this concept should play no role in our current ELCA discussion.

Let me expand on what Paris-Austin and Rawlings have said by drawing briefly on Critical Race Theory (CRT). The tit-for-tat attempt to place everyone into a status of victim would get us nowhere. To avoid this, we might be tempted to go colorblind or think of our organization as post-racial. This is not viable either.

What do I mean? Discourse centered on "colorblindness" or a "post-racial society" begs for deconstruction by CRT. "Colorblindness as doctrine not only undermines litigation strategies that rely on race-conscious remediation, but also soothes social anxiety about whether deeper levels of social criticism, remediation, and reconstruction might be warranted. . . . Post-racialism offers a gentler escape, an



appeal to the possibility that racial power can be side-stepped, finessed and ultimately overcome by regarding dominance as merely circumstance that need not get in the way of social progress.”<sup>8</sup> Avoiding the pitfalls of tit-for-tat victimage, colorblindness, and post-racialism requires caution as we walk forward. In short, I endorse the caution raised by Paris-Austin and Rawlings.

With this in mind, my own proposal for the future of the ELCA is definitely not a sappy colorblindness or a fake post-racial subculture. Our efforts to counter racial injustice, however, are the responsibility of both those designated as white people and people of color. We are “church together,” says Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, with great frequency. The insistence on the binary of the Authentic Diversity document risks placing the burden of exposing racism solely on the shoulders of the people of color while canceling contributions from the so-called white people.

Now, back to James Cone. When teaching seminary students, I frequently assign Cone’s singularly provocative systematic theology, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Cone is unyielding in his blistering criticism of the white establishment in both society and church. My white students would rise up in anger, because Cone would not let them squirm off the hook. On one occasion when Jim Cone and I were having lunch, I told him how angry his book made my white seminarians. He chuckled and quipped, “Well, I like to carry my readers.”

Third, upholding white supremacy. Paris-Austin and Rawlings shoot the poisonous *ad hominem* arrow. “This essay is an excellent example of a liberal white male trying very hard to declare he is not racist while upholding white supremacy.” Why might such a poisonous arrow be shot at a fellow Lutheran traveler?

Yes, I’m guilty of being a liberal white male. I love living in liberal communities such as Berkeley, because my multi-racial family feels more at home with multi-racial liberals. Yet, simply being liberal is not the same as being sanctified. We liberals remain *simul justus et peccator*, still sinners. May I critique the white liberal?

Let me fire an arrow at white progressives such as myself. One of my graduate school professors, Langdon Gilkey, a neo-orthodox critic of liberal Protestantism, frequently used the term “ethical idealism” to describe hypocrisy among liberals. Accordingly, liberals lift up the Enlightenment principles of dignity, equality, justice, and democracy. Liberals shout these values from the roof tops. But, here’s the hitch. We liberals fool ourselves into thinking that just because we hold these values that we actually live these values.

In sum, liberal white males and all other progressives need to engage in “confession, reflection, and healing action.” Please make no mistake about my defense or

criticism of our white liberal—actually progressive—ELCA leadership: a spirituality of repentance and action is still required. But we need to add to such repentance an effective strategy of practical outreach.

My objection to feeding the unhappy consciousness seeks to liberate people of color from just one more obligation to serve the white establishment. For a person of color to gain an identity as the one who’s task is to verbally lash the white establishment turns this identity into another form of dependence. Somehow, we in the ELCA need to cure this sick spirituality into something more bold and brave. Even if we invest the near future in the transformation the Authentic Diversity document recommends, we’ll need a subsequent vision beyond that is healthy and robust. [Yes, in this article I’m lashing the white establishment. But I don’t recommend this lashing endure forever and ever.]

It appears to my critics that I’m a white supremacist seeking membership in the BIPOC club. What I think I’m doing, in contrast, is addressing ELCA racism in a way that may seem at first counter-intuitive. When BIPOC bash liberal or progressive white Lutherans, it only strengthens institutional racism. Why? Because of the unhappy consciousness that turns guilt into self-satisfaction. In sum, the way forward is toward directing attention to those previously marginalized and away from the white center of the ELCA. Again, practical outreach directs us away from the white center toward expanding ELCA fellowship.

### 3 | READ THE DOCUMENT MORE CLOSELY, TED!

Both my friends and my detractors on the Authentic Diversity Advisory Team have exclaimed, “read the document more closely, Ted! You’ll find there the kind of practical recommendations by people of color you ask for.”

Upon re-reading Authentic Diversity, I see once again that nearly every recommendation is directed at white-centered healing, awareness, reflection, training, structural accountability, ecumenical partnerships, and such.

This has led to further reflections. I do not want to criticize the document again. Rather I’d like to complement it by adding practical applications.

If you the reader affirm the cancelation culture and do not want to listen to a white male, then you may wish to stop reading at this point. But I’d like to extend the conversation constructively

### 4 | SLOTTING AND SEGREGATION

The Authentic Diversity document defines “Racism” as “a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice.”<sup>9</sup> If this is

a mix, might we gain something from distinguishing the elements in the mix? The document hints at this when we read, "The ELCA recognizes the perpetuation of racism still exists within the denomination despite personal good intentions." Note, "despite personal good intentions." This suggests that ferreting out racial prejudice from institutional racism might aid us in the diagnosis and therapy.

This is why I would like further consideration given to dealing separately with prejudice and racism. 'Prejudice' denotes personal or cultural bias, whereas 'racism' denotes impersonal institutional structures that function in a discriminatory way. If we use the term, 'racism', when talking about 'prejudice', it will turn everyone's attention to white spirituality. It will keep the whites at the center of attention. We in the ELCA need to turn our attention away from the white center of our institution toward the margins where our church life connects—or should connect—with individuals and families of color in our neighborhoods and communities.

Even though in today's media, these two are equated, retrieving the distinction between prejudice and racism within the ELCA could be helpful in supplying the right remedy to the right problem. Anti-racism seminars certainly can be helpful for dealing with prejudice, to be sure; but when we wish to attack institutional racism we need a different strategy, a more practical strategy.

Let me provide one diagnostic example, namely, slotting. As a faculty member cultivating the academic and professional growth of seminarians, I observed over the years an unusual pattern of assignment. I call it 'slotting'.

Each spring at seminary when a graduating class of M.Div. students was budding, bishops would show up to make their selections. When an African American or Spanish speaking candidate would appear, the bishops licked their chops like a hungry teenager smelling the aroma of dinner cooking on the kitchen stove.

Once the exotic student of color had been assigned, the synodical bishop would offer this person a special ministry. These special ministries came in two slots, tokenism or segregation.

The first slot was tokenism. That is, the student would be given an administrative position, show up at meetings, get on and off airplanes with a briefcase, and demonstrate to the world that our church is a diverse church. Our persons of color have by and large performed magnificently in their role of administrative leaders, to be sure; but this practice in itself has not quashed institutional racism.

The other slot would be a segregated parish assignment. An African American seminarian would be sent to an African American parish. A Spanish speaking student to a Spanish speaking neighborhood to create a parish brand new. And so on. The net effect was racism in the form of

segregation such as existed in our Lutheran churches prior to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Parishes with an ethnic heritage such as Norwegian, Swedish, or German would be denied the opportunity to get the feel of being a diverse church by enjoying a person-of-color as their pastor.

To be sure, our bishops have "good intentions" and are personally well meaning; they have an earnest passion for making the ELCA an inclusive church. To fault them for racial prejudice would miss the mark. Our bishops in no way support white privilege or advocate for white supremacy. Just the opposite. Yet, institutional racism continues.

Sending our bishops to one more antiracism workshop will not address the concern here. What we need is a more clearly thought-through strategy for practical outreach.

Now, let me pause with a second thought. Our churchwide administration and our synodical bishops practice tokenism and segregation with the result that our denomination remains predominantly white. Maybe an antiracism workshop—a cleverly designed antiracism workshop—might be called for after all!

## 5 | THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

"Congregations of color are closing at a higher rate than white congregations." I want to thank the drafting team for mentioning this. It is this fact more than others that should prompt our seminary deans and faculties to ask: how should we transform our curriculum? Our new curriculum should include very specific training for ministry to and with communities of color, diverse ethnicities, and refugees in the neighborhoods of our congregations. In our emerging post-Covid 19 era, this should include online international communities as well. These are practical extensions of what seminary education is already doing well.

Here is the diagnosis and therapy proposed by Authentic Diversity:

Over the years, theological education within the ELCA has failed to equip Lutherans with an understanding of the gospel that can help dismantle racist practices and structure within our churches and institutions. The inadequacy of theological education and leadership formation in our church should be addressed by engaging voices from the margins.

The Authentic Diversity diagnosis is that our seminaries have failed to teach the "gospel." Their prescribed therapy



is to engage “voices” from the margins. I agree on the therapy but not on the diagnosis.

I have participated firsthand in presentation of the gospel to seminarians for many decades. I am confident that the gospel—the story of Jesus told with its significance—has been taught, proclaimed, and lived. At PLTS where I teach, a racially blended faculty has sought for half a century to include new voices from the margins; and we have sought to challenge directly white privilege with required courses such as “People of Color.”

The problem has surfaced elsewhere, namely, in practical ecclesiology. Our seminary curriculum has not—by and large—responded to local communities with strong ethnic and immigrant subcultures. At my seminary, for one example, I witnessed an institutional refusal to take an initiative to address the influx of displaced Chinese from the 1997 Hong Kong takeover. Thank God for the LCMS school system in San Francisco who did respond to Chinese immigration.

On behalf of practical outreach, I believe appeal to public theology, liberation theology, postmodern theology, or critical race theory offers nothing of value for our next curriculum revision. I love these schools of theological thought, to be sure. At PLTS, these schools of thought have appeared in our curriculum for decades; and I wish to see their teaching continued. But these theological enterprises deal with marginalization at a high level of abstraction and generalization; they speak at the global level. What ELCA seminary curriculum reform needs now is much more local and specific. It requires first empirical investigation into the needs and aspirations of specific racial and ethnic families, churches, and communities. The greater the specificity of *applicatio* (application of the gospel), the greater the effectiveness.

This may be the most important point I would like to make.

One more observation regarding practical outreach. I believe the TEEM program provides an example of an ELCA enterprise that’s doing it right. It invests pedagogical efforts to train willing persons from a wide variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. And, at the same time, TEEM provides a channel of enlightening observations to the seminaries about families and communities outside the ELCA mainstream. Go TEEM!

## 6 | CONCLUSION

I’m aware that the family metaphor can be overused, but the vision of Galatians 3:28 evokes an image of our future church as a happy family wherein each individual nourishes and flourishes.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Peters, T. (2021). “Overcoming ELCA racism with authentic diversity.” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 21:1. <https://learn.elca.org/jle/overcoming-elca-racism-with-authentic-diversity/>.
- <sup>2</sup> “How Strategic and Authentic is Our Diversity: A Call for Confession, Reflection and Healing Action,” adopted by the fifteenth triennial Churchwide Assembly on August 9, 2019 at Milwaukee, Wisconsin; [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy\\_Toward\\_Authentic\\_Diversity.pdf?\\_ga=2.268667378.2061013074.1595792543-301935741.1595430762](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy_Toward_Authentic_Diversity.pdf?_ga=2.268667378.2061013074.1595792543-301935741.1595430762).
- <sup>3</sup> By *unhappy consciousness* I refer to a spiritual mindset that feels good when feeling miserable. Borrowed from philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, the unhappy consciousness (*das unglückliche Bewußtsein*) describes a self that is divided within itself. How does unhappy consciousness work in spiritual practice? Imagine yourself to be a monk or a nun in a medieval monastery. You are practicing asceticism, that is, you are abstaining from worldly pleasures to pursue spiritual goals. You have made vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity. You cultivate self-sacrificial habits such as prayer, hospitality, compassion, and almsgiving. You request a physical flogging to rid yourself of sins such as pride or judging others. The more you suffer, the better you feel. The inverted logic goes like this: *the unhappier I am the happier I am*. The degree of your happiness becomes correlated to the degree of your agony. In the ELCA the unhappy consciousness expresses itself when placing people of color on the periphery and then asking people of color to verbally flagellate the whites in the center for being hopelessly racist. The resulting pain leads to confession and makes the white progressive Lutheran feel so noble, so self-justified. This is what I call “white-centered spirituality.” I feared that the Authentic Diversity document would backfire because it sustains the unhappy consciousness and, thereby, misses initiatives in practical outreach.
- <sup>4</sup> Allende, Abraham. (2021). “Letter from the ELCA Authentic Diversity Team,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 21(2); <https://learn.elca.org/jle/5401-2/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Two more comments about St. Olaf. First, in my fictional novel, *For God and Country* (Apocryphile Press, 2017), I wrote in a character of color, a Creole black man, who attends St. Olaf and sings in the choir. Secretly, he and the St. Olaf choir director, Anton Armstrong, become friends. This is fiction, of course. Second, in 2009 I was honored to serve as the Martin Marty professor of theology and science. St. Olaf is clearly a fine institution, one that every ELCA member should take pride in. Now a comment about Wittenberg University. When the two South African Zulus we helped raise were ready for college, I communicated with a dozen ELCA colleges. Only Wittenberg welcomed them with open arms, even providing enough financial assistance to make private higher education affordable. Martin and Derek flowered in the Wittenberg setting, returning to South Africa with university degrees just in time for the fall of Apartheid. While I am at it, I might register my fear at the current outbreak of violence against Asian people due to the absurd blame for Covid 19 on China. My four children and grandchildren of Korean descent are less fearful than I am. Whew.
- <sup>6</sup> Elizabeth belongs now to the Orthodox Church of America. Her conversion was precipitated by matters of faith, not racial inclusion. As soldiers in the social media wars, Elizabeth and my



granddaughter, Lydia, observe that every liberal Protestant denomination appears overwhelmed with anger and vitriol.

Ted Peters 

<sup>7</sup> Priscilla Paris-Austin and Elizabeth Rawlings, "A clarifying response to the Journal of Lutheran Ethics and Ted Peters regarding the ELCA Strategy Towards Authentic Diversity," *Disrupt Worship* <https://www.disruptworshipproject.com/blog/>. The *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* liked this article well enough to reprint it in the April 2021 issue. Other critics of my article could be included here in my response, but I am respecting such critics' request to NOT quote what has been said. In what follows I will focus primarily on the article by Paris-Austin and Rawlings.

<sup>8</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. (2011). "Twenty years of critical race theory: looking back to move forward," *Connecticut Law Review*, 43(5), 1253–1348, at 1326–1327.

<sup>9</sup> This repeats a 1993 definition. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture," (1993) document's italics; <https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/RaceSS.pdf>.

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