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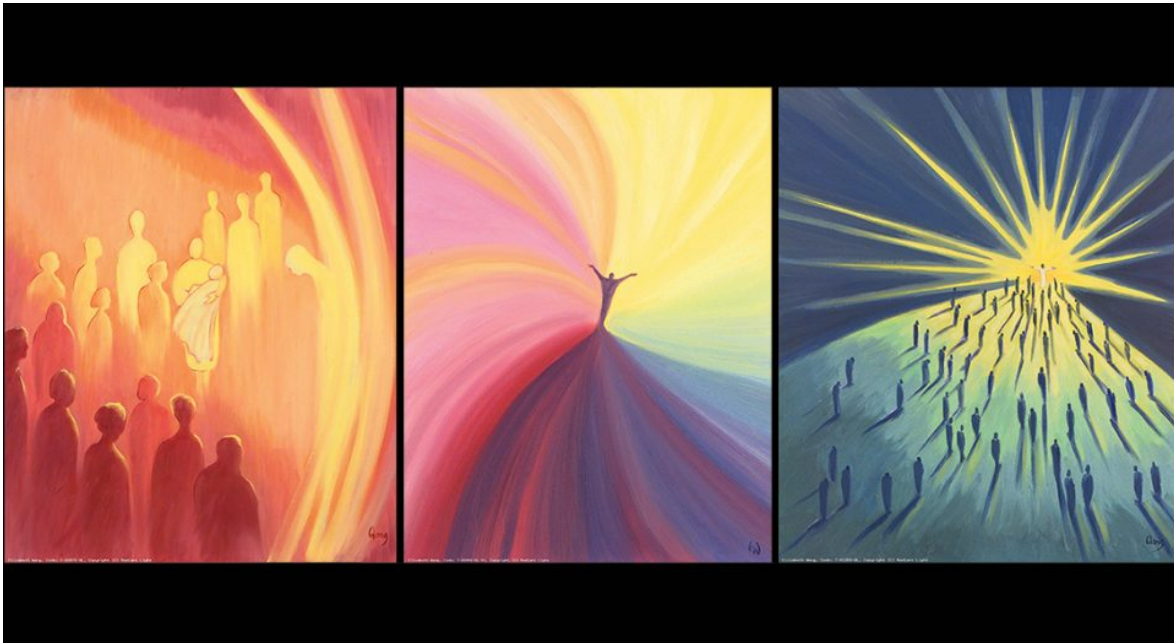
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**How to Swim Upstream:
Transforming Ministry from Conflict to Courage**



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Abstract

How to Swim Upstream: Transforming Ministry from Conflict to Courage

By Kevin Lyle Strickland

We are a storied people. Stories allow us to share ourselves and who we are as a people. Stories also show us how to become what we have yet to allow ourselves. Each week, the people of God gather in assembly. Within this assembly, the church gathers in worship. Worship celebrates God's story in preaching, singing, liturgical language, bread, wine, and water. God's story and humanity's story are intertwined.

And yet, God's story and our own have become more divided and politically partisan. This divide is most evident on Sunday mornings when the Christian assembly gathers for worship. It is as accurate today as it was when Martin Luther King, Jr. said in 1964, "Sunday mornings are the most segregated hour in America." This racial divide is clearly evident in the majority white denomination of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, especially in the Bible Belt. The racist-rooted geography of the Deep South still springs forth within the sordid stories of the past and creates conflict.

For a denomination like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which has committed itself to the eradication of racism, that necessary work is not always met with optimism or a willingness from all people. Pastors are accused of being "too political" or "too partisan." People shut down, conflict arises, and the work of fighting racism halts. Working towards that beloved community is possible. Indifference is not an option, and I agree that love and hope provide the strength we need for this work.

In light of this, three related interactions with the laity are necessary: preaching which involves the laity to provide context during sermon preparation and to engage in reflexive theological engagement to evaluate for partisanism; engaging the laity liturgically with word usage of hymnody, prayers, and art that address eradicating racism; and providing conflict transformation tools so congregations can work on breaking down barriers through table talks. By actively listening to one another, we learn that there is far more that unites us than divides us. The people of God need to be engaged in how God's story calls us to the action of justice for building a beloved community where all are valued and welcomed.

**How to Swim Upstream:
Transforming Ministry from Conflict to Courage**

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A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
2024

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Acknowledgments and Dedication

I would like to thank all of the professors, classmates, and staff of Candler School of Theology who accompanied me to this point. I would also like to thank my staff, synod council, and the Southeastern Synod for your support in these three years and letting me try some working ideas out with you. Lastly, I would like to thank, but also dedicate this work to, my husband Robby Saner. Without him, I could not have done this work, had the courage to say yes, stick with it, and see it to completion. Thank you! *Soli Deo gloria!*

Introduction: The Church Needs to Swim into Justice's Streams

Good Friday 2018 will forever live in my memory. I joined hundreds of ministers on the Southside of Chicago to walk the stations of the cross. These were not like the normal stations. There was *nothing* normal about these stations; abnormal even. Why? We stopped at fourteen different places where black men were targets of gun violence, either by the police or gangs. There is nothing normal about that, other than the fact that we have normalized violence and racial prejudice as a nation; the church has too often been complicit in our silence.

As we approached each station, water taken from a local baptismal font was sprinkled on the grounds, marking the brutality, and the mighty words of the prophet Amos cried aloud: "But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."¹ Justice and righteousness bid to come and flow like streams all over that city, nation, and world. And the church was invited to swim deeply in those waters.

The church was present that day in the public square, proclaiming the Gospel in the streets. The powerful words of our commitment to confess the sin of racism were met with the reality of lament. The sacramental actions made them all the more potent of water, Word, and song, a powerful model for practical ministry. Why? Because it wasn't about politics or partisanship. People of all races and faiths were united by our physical bodies, walking, confessing, lamenting in liturgical procession, and stooping at each death site with baptismal waters. What was a conflicted, fraught issue became a human, a mother's child. The church would do well to model what we preach in more bodily ways.

The experience of that Good Friday and the clarion call of Amos rings deeply in my ears. It has led me to ask how a predominately white denomination in the Bible Belt can engage in the

¹ Amos 5:24 (NRSVUE)

eradication of institutional racism, as the living out of our baptismal waters and not partisan politics so that as the Southeastern Synod, we create specific formational opportunities for this transformational kin-dom² work.

The church has made many attempts to address diversity and racism, but most attempts have failed. In the "Bible Belt," racism and other exclusive forces are still prevalent within the culture and the church. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)³ comprises 65 synods, which are geographical territories governed by bishops. As one of those bishops, I oversee the states of Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee, and Since being elected bishop, I have attempted to address these issues.⁴

I am interested in how we equip, empower, and engage congregations within the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA in becoming communities of witnesses that combat racism and other exclusionary isms. These issues are profoundly significant in our times and within this cultural context of the Deep South. Where there are significant issues, systemic even, and prolonged standing, our baptismal promises convict us to address these issues and work to bring to fruition, "thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." The problem is that when issues of bigotry, racism, homophobia, or anything that is an "ism" are raised, pastors and others become accused of being too political or partisan. Sides are chosen, conversations halt, and the work of bending the moral arc toward justice reverts to more oppressive systems.

² The term "kin-dom" was first used by Georgine Wilson, O.S.F. as a more inclusive term to replace the term "kingdom" which has been viewed historically as sexist and elitist, especially within marginalized communities. See Diana Butler Bass, "The Kin-Dom of God," *Red Letter Christians* (blog), December 15, 2021, <https://www.redletterchristians.org/the-kin-dom-of-god/>.

³ For more information on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, see Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "About the ELCA," ELCA.org, accessed March 19, 2024, <https://elca.org:443/About>.

⁴ I was elected as the fourth bishop of the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA on June 2, 2019 to a six-year term. At the time of my election, I was the second openly gay person elected bishop within the ELCA. The contender on the ballot was an African American female. Either of us to be elected in the Deep South would have been historical and notable. See Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Kevin Strickland Elected Bishop of the ELCA Southeastern Synod," ELCA.org, accessed March 19, 2024, <https://elca.org/News-and-Events/7979>.

Approaching this question and this work, I find this quote from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. convicting: "Love is one of the pinnacle parts of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is Love in application. Justice is Love correcting that which would work against Love. . . . Standing beside Love is always justice."⁵ My hoped-for outcome from this work would be to continue the groundwork already laid since my election as bishop in the areas of diversity and justice.

As a synod, we have begun creating diversity and justice taskforces in every congregation, conducting racial justice boundary training for all clergy, raising reparations funds, and tackling the systemic issues of racism as a church in the Bible Belt.⁶ Yet partisan politics create a great divide in who we are as a church and halt much of the work of justice we should be about. To build upon this work, it is critical to address the partisan divide within our congregations and its effect on how we relate to scripture.

Therefore, I set forth to address this partisan divide within our congregations which inhibits us from living out our baptismal calling. I will do this through three related interactions that lead to new patterns of preaching, liturgy, and conflict transformation. I would like to use this work to continue training and equipping leaders and communities within my synod to be bold about the biblical call to justice and righteousness.

⁵ BlackPast, "(1955) Martin Luther King Jr., 'The Montgomery Bus Boycott,'" January 17, 2012, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1955-martin-luther-king-jr-montgomery-bus-boycott/>.

⁶ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Diversity and Justice," ELCA.org, accessed March 19, 2024, <https://www.elca-ses.org/diversity-and-justice>.

Background: The ELCA Wades in the Water that God's Gonna Trouble

The ELCA was formed in 1988 when three predecessor Lutheran bodies merged—namely, the American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Lutheran Church in America. Lutherans in North America trace their roots to the mid-17th century when early Lutherans (of white descent) immigrated from Europe, and have remained predominately white ever since.

At the ELCA's formation, it attempted to address the issues of race and justice. It voted to add a requirement to its constitution that within ten years, 10% of ELCA congregations, councils, committees, boards, and other organizational units must comprise people of color or people whose primary language is not English:

Since its founding, the ELCA has been committed to cultural diversity. Historically, American Lutheranism saw immigrants from other cultures struggling to maintain the best of their cultural heritage. More recently, Lutherans have recognized that faithful proclamation of the Gospel and witness for justice requires that Lutherans respect and learn from other cultures. At its Constituting Convention in 1988, this church adopted the goal “that within ten years of its establishment, its membership shall include at least 10% people of color and primary language other than English.”⁷

We did not meet this target, and it severely limited us as a church and delayed our work to combat racism and other detrimental "-isms" that create barriers to living into the fullness that God created us to be.

At the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly (a triennial event where the largest governing body consisting of church laity, pastors, deacons, and bishops meet), voting members voted to delete the target above from its constitution. Voters created an "Authentic Diversity" statement, calling the church to long-overdue action:

⁷ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture (A Guide for Leading Conversations on Race, Ethnicity, and Culture in Your Congregation),” accessed March 19, 2024, https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/RaceSS_Study_Guide.pdf?_ga=2.55479787.1966780741.1710883171-1249678463.1710883171.

The various 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.⁸

The assembly then charged all sixty-five synods to offer racial justice boundary training for rostered ministers, congregations, and candidates for ministry.

The church has made many attempts to address diversity and racism, but most have been failed attempts. In the Bible Belt, racism and other exclusive forces are still prevalent within the culture and the church. Even after 400 years, the pandemic of racism continues to plague both culture and church. Many use “partisan politics” or “social justice” as opportunities to shut down, stop listening, and choose sides. If we do not actively engage in this work, who are we as the church?

Or, as lay member Shari Siefert from Calvary Lutheran Church of Minneapolis, MN, stated, “It wasn’t that long ago when I wondered why my denomination is 96% white. Why, when the country is not 96% white, and we are to be the one body of Christ, is our denomination still so white?”⁹ Siefert (who now leads the European Descent Lutherans Association Against Racism) went on to state succinctly why I profoundly believe in this work:

I was devastated as I came to a greater understanding of why so many of our siblings in Christ don’t feel welcome in the ELCA. While their stories aren’t mine to share, I recognize that the vital work of making the church less harmful to people of color and indigenous people *is my work to do*.

⁸ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “How Strategic and Authentic Is Our Diversity: A Call for Confession, Reflection, and Healing Action,” 4, accessed March 19, 2024, https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy_Toward_Authentic_Diversity.pdf?_ga=2.10480245.1966780741.1710883171-1249678463.1710883171.

⁹ Andrea Kulik, “Unpacking White Privilege,” *Living Lutheran* (blog), January 17, 2020, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2020/01/unpacking-white-privilege/>.

It's not enough to say, "We are sorry." We must put actions behind our words. We must take a moral inventory of our wrongs and make reparations for the same. The solution to any problem is first to admit that there is one.¹⁰

Indeed, before we, as a church, rush for a solution to a problem, we must admit that there is one. Denominationally, we have done this. However, that admittance does not translate into all the congregations within this national church. Nor is it within the four-state area of the Southeastern Synod.

As a bishop, I have negotiated over fourteen pastors out of a call over my four years. Most were due to accusations of "being too political" or "being too involved in social justice work." When I pried more, I found out (in listening to sermons and speaking with members) that many of those preached about racism and white supremacy as a sin. Many were involved in LGBTQIA marches, gun violence rallies, and Black Lives Matter protests.

The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), in their 2023 survey of "Religion and Congregations in a Time of Religious and Social Upheaval" found that approximately 37% of mainline non-evangelical Protestants discuss racism within preaching or church contexts, whereas more than 57% of Black Protestants preach or discuss racism regularly.¹¹ Within the one hundred and fifty-five plus congregations of the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA, I agree that those percentages largely represent most of the Lutherans in this area. This research pointed to the lived tension growing within our congregations and increasing to a more significant divide.¹²

The survey shared:

Despite most churchgoers agreeing that the church should provide perspectives on social issues, less than half (45%) agree, "Congregations should get involved in social issues, even if that means having challenging conversations about politics." Democratic churchgoers (56%) are more likely than Republican (40%) and independent churchgoers

¹⁰ Kulik.

¹¹ See Appendix E for Figure 13, "Frequency of Discussing Political Topics, by Religious Affiliation."

¹² See Appendix E for Figure 16, "Church's Role in Providing a Faith Perspective on Social Issues vs. Getting Involved."

(43%) to agree that churches should get involved in social issues. Black Protestants are the only Christian group in which a majority believe congregations should get involved (63%). Among other groups, 44% of white evangelical Protestants and Hispanic Catholics, 43% of white mainline/non-evangelical Protestants, 42% of white Catholics, 41% of Hispanic Protestants, and 32% of other Christians agree.¹³

As Raphael Warnock reminds us, “The Black Church was born fighting for freedom. The freedom for which the black church has fought has always been internal and external, expressing itself politically and spiritually, embracing black bodies and souls.”¹⁴ Or, to be clearer on what we mean when we say “preaching is political,” Jay Augustine helpfully defines that “The word politics, as translated from Greek, simply means affairs of the cities. Consequently, when the church gets political, it addresses matters of the state that morally compel its active engagement and prophetic resistance.”¹⁵ The predominantly white denomination of the ELCA has not had to fight for freedom because it was not born fighting, at least not in the same way. Lutherans were born out of a need for reform. Can we reclaim the Reformation needed to eradicate institutionalized racism?

As a denomination, the ELCA has publicly committed itself to eradicating racism. In 2019, the ELCA stated, “As a church, we are called to confess the sin of racism, condemn the ideology of white supremacy, and strive for racial justice and peace. Beyond statements and prayers, we are called also to act and respond to injustices.”¹⁶ Most parishioners do not always welcome those theological commitments, especially when naming the sin of racism and, even more, institutional racism; conversation halts and walls are constructed.

¹³ PRRI, “Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval,” May 16, 2023, <https://www.prii.org/research/religion-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-social-and-political-upheaval/>.

¹⁴ Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York: NYU Press, 2020), 13.

¹⁵ Jonathan C. Augustine, *When Prophets Preach: Leadership and the Politics of the Pulpit* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023), 19.

¹⁶ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “ELCA Anti-Racism Pledge,” ELCA.org, accessed March 19, 2024, <https://www.elca.org:443/racialjusticepledge>.

Could we be called for such a time as the Lutheran witness to proclaim and do this necessary work? Could it be past time, and we are catching up? Yes! But we need to recognize the challenges: we are often pining for the church of yesteryear, coming out of a global pandemic, worrying over church attendance and finances, and honestly, fearing any talk that could rock the boats of white privilege is too risky.

One way to reframe our current situation is to understand it as straddling liminal space.

As Susan Beaumont so aptly put it:

During liminal seasons, we stand on both sides of a threshold. We have one foot rooted in something not yet ready to begin. Our old operating structures may no longer work. Our denominational polity, our governing board and committee structures, our staffing arrangement—all were suited for conditions that have evolved. Our strategic identities—who we are, who we serve, and what we feel called to do or become—were shaped by old experiences. We may no longer be served well by these outdated constructs, but we aren't certain what we need next.¹⁷

Not knowing the direction is evident in the church in pastors and deacons, musicians and cantors, youth directors, and ministers. Beaumont's conviction is apt, accurate, and even terrifying if we let it: "We may no longer be served well by these outdated constructs, but we aren't certain what we need next."

And that not knowing is what causes some anxiety and even leads to conflicted systems. But then we have to think of what the divine mission, as David Woolverton calls it, of your context is and can be.¹⁸ We need to permit ourselves to rethink what and who the church is with a forced need for the church to rethink itself as less brick and mortar, more organic presence of the gathered assembly in the varied formats it takes. That rethinking has allowed the church to

¹⁷ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2019), 7.

¹⁸ David E. Woolverton, *Mission Rift: Leading through Church Conflict* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021).105.

live fully into adaptation and adopt new possibilities for ministry, from necessity and permission seeking to stepping out and risking for the sake of the Gospel.

The church is indeed discovering new pathways forward and all the while adapting to what our world, our human condition, and organized religion will look like post-pandemic. We can only do the work to ensure it is also one day post-pandemic of institutionalized racism. And to be clear, I am referring to institutionalized racism as defined by Joseph Barndt:

Institutionalized racism is the intentional shaping and structuring of an institution so that it effectively serves and is accountable to one racial group and does not effectively serve nor is responsible to other racial groups. Institutionalized racism exists because of intentional structural design. It is not an accident, an oversight, or simply the result of scheming by a few biased individuals.¹⁹

In diving into those waters, we will wade deeper into the water that “God’s gonna trouble”²⁰ for good. Three areas will help specifically address these issues that are contextual to the geography of the Bible Belt, denominational ecclesiology, and liturgical theology, include a more intentional pedagogy on hermeneutics and scripture in context, liturgical opportunities that address our call to action against racism, and “table talk” opportunities that work towards conflict transformation.

¹⁹ Joseph R. Barndt, *Understanding & Dismantling Racism: The Twenty-First Century Challenge to White America* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 153–54.

²⁰ These phrases come from “Wade in the Water,” an African-American religious song used by abolitionists and during the Civil Rights Movement; its lyrics echo that of the ancient Israelites in the book of Exodus. See Jacob Uitti, “Behind the Meaning of the Classic Gospel Song ‘Wade In The Water,’” *American Songwriter*, February 3, 2023, <https://americansongwriter.com/behind-the-meaning-of-the-classic-gospel-song-wade-in-the-water/>.

Preaching: Addressing the Epidemic of Racism from the Pulpit to the Public Square

As the ELCA seeks to live into a call to become a more anti-racist church, and as I seek ways to lead as a bishop who trains pastors and congregations in biblical advocacy, we must draw from the wealth of knowledge of the Black Church tradition. As Warnock stated, “Liberation is not exclusively a political event but also an eschatological happening. It is the power of God’s Spirit invading the people’s lives, building them up where they are torn down and proppin’ them up on every leanin’ side.”²¹ We must remember what Jesus called for in the kin-dom; the one to come was political.

It was the politics of the kin-dom of God and was not partisan. It proclaimed the already-but-not-yet hope. As Jesus reminds those in his ministry while reading from Isaiah:

He [Jesus] unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:17b-19 NRSVUE)

Connecting those biblical dots for people is where the work needs to occur. Connecting people with others who do not share their same race, orientation, denomination, and more is all-important in breaking down the barriers that have been constructed. Little by little, those steps will assist us in the work we are called to do in breaking down isms that do not lead to liberation.

Acknowledging racism as a sin (something that draws us from God) is the first step. Then, we can swim upstream and address the pandemic of racism from the pulpit to the public square. It is crucial to remember the mission of Jesus in thinking of our call into mission as the baptized ones of God. Healing and brokenness are not all Jesus was about, nor are we. More often than not, we are called to call a thing a thing. Jesus did! “Healing and brokenness are,

²¹ Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 102–3.

indeed, part of what the church is about. However, Jesus did not define his mission as ministry as a healing ministry; rather, he healed as an invitational sign announcing the inauguration of a New Day: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’ (Mark 1:15).”²²

Despite this declaration, preaching what Jesus preached will get a preacher in just as much trouble as it did Jesus - well, maybe not a crucifixion, but an angry congregation and calls to the bishop. In my four years as bishop, I have received several letters, phone calls, and e-mails from parishioners complaining their pastor is “preaching too politically” or involved in too much “social justice work.” I realize that I serve in the Deep South, but I have come to see a stark difference between preaching partisan politics and Jesus’ politics.

I interviewed three other ELCA bishops and asked them questions about political preaching, as detailed in Appendix A. When I asked Bishop Tracie Bartholomew of the New Jersey Synod if she thought a parishioner’s claim that a pastor in her synod was being too political had any merit, she responded, “The pastors who are preaching the politics of Jesus do that well when they point to Jesus’ life, and our callings are to live our Mary’s song of the Magnificat. Living a baptized life means living a life that calls us to turn the world upside down so that all may be right side up.”²³ You may even wonder, what is “Mary’s song? From the beginning of Luke’s Gospel:

⁴⁶ And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Indeed, from now on, all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 And holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
 From generation to generation.

²² Woolverton, *Mission Rift*, 90.

²³ Tracie Bartholomew, interview by Kevin L. Strickland, phone, November 29, 2021.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”²⁴

Professor Rolf Jacobson of Luther Seminary shares a stirring framing of this critical text.

Jacobson states, “The so-called “Magnificat” (somehow that name is too tame) is a radical protest song. The kind of song that the enslaved Israelites might have sung in Egypt. The kind of song you might have heard on the lips of the exiled Judeans in Babylon. The kind of song sung by countless people of faith through the ages in resistance, in defiance of empires, slavers, terrorists, invaders, and the like.”²⁵ Given this, we have a unique opportunity not only to talk about Mary’s song or even to sing it but also to enter into the promises to which it gives voice. Mary sings of God’s mercy, promising that God lifts the lowly, the downtrodden, and the oppressed, not just of her day but of our own.

How can we sing with Mary a song of resistance and persistence, and help make our lives a living reality of that song of justice, if our worship doesn’t speak to God’s mercy and splendor and have we just kept silent? With Mary, God also asks us to carry the child Jesus in our lives—to bring him to term and maturity (Ephesians 4:11-13) in our hearts. What would it mean to say “yes” and sing with Mary? Frank Honeycutt tells this story:

In London, after the Second World War, there was an orphanage some soldiers visited on Christmas morning—“Queen Anne’s Orphanage” in the heart of the city. The soldiers had been walking by on the street and heard a celebration inside. The house mother

²⁴ Luke 1:46-55 (NRSVue)

²⁵ Rolf Jacobson, “Commentary on Luke 1:46b-55,” *Working Preacher from Luther Seminary* (blog), December 19, 2021, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-146-55-3>.

gladly received them and explained that the children's parents had been killed in the bombing raids. The orphanage was a sparse place—no tree and no presents. The soldiers moved around the room and passed out small gifts from their pockets: Life Savers, chewing gum, coins, pencils.

One little boy, though, stood back from the men. He was quiet and timid. One soldier approached him and asked, “And you, little guy, what do you want for Christmas?” The boy slowly answered, “Will. . . will you hold me?” The soldier picked up the little boy, nestled him close, and held him tight. God asks Mary the same question: Will you hold me? And that is the question posed to all of us. Will we hold Jesus and carry him with us no matter the interruption or inconvenience? Will we sing with Mary, carrying Jesus in our lives, no matter the interruption of evil?²⁶

Whether people are Christmas and Easter Christians, once every five weeks as the new statistics recommend, or every week attendees, they, you, we all need to hear words of forgiveness, conviction, lament, and a place to vulnerably testify to the truth of this world and hear the validity of the Gospel for each of us.

Mary's song is the central starting part of Jesus's ministry, and not only *his* call to action but our own. Where all are valued for their full personhood, our souls will magnify the Lord, and our spirits will rejoice in God our Savior.

The caution when preaching like Mary is to keep in mind, “The vision and hope of Christianity that we call ‘the gospel’ has been domesticated from the proud-scattering, throne-crushing vision of Mary in Luke 1:46-55, to a personal faith so often reinforces our individual wants and fears while also reinforcing the divisions of class and social mobility.”²⁷ Mary's song is the foundation for preaching at the crossroads of the pulpit and public square, but be prepared for Mary's song when preached and lived to get you in good trouble.

²⁶ Frank G. Honeycutt, *95 Prostheses: Appendages and Musings for the Body of Christ in Transition* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 32–33.

²⁷ Tim Conder and Daniel Rhodes, *Organizing Church: Grassroots Practices for Embodying Change in Your Congregation, Your Community, and Our World* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2017), 6.

That type of thinking and preaching is what Jesus was all about. Yes, Jesus was political in so much as he challenged the powers and principalities of this world and was not always liked. When Bishop Regina Hassanally of the Southeastern Minnesota Synod answered the same question, she stated:

Sometimes, I agree with the “my pastor is being too political” complaint because I often hear sermons that seem more social commentary than biblical proclamation. The Word of God is powerful, and if we preach it, it might strike some people as political, and it will also be the Word of God. We run into trouble when we wax philosophical about our views and forget the job of a preacher is to ground people in scripture so they might live through a biblical lens. We underestimate the power of the Word of God in our preaching. Faithful preaching will convict people; it may even divide congregations, but it will also be faithful. Social commentary will make a preacher feel good but leave people longing for something more.²⁸

Bishop Hassanally pointed out that fine line I often see crossed in preaching—the line that creates the great divide instead of calling us to the great divine.

For instance, on the same Sunday, I heard two different preachers preach the exact text in the same context. The text was from Leviticus, “When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The stranger who lives as a foreigner with you shall be to you as the native-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you lived as foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh, your God.”²⁹ Preacher A said, “Any of you who does not welcome all refugees and immigrants might as well be part of the Baptist Church, the place where all closed-minded Republicans worship.” In a later service, Preacher B said, “We have all been those who have felt far off, not welcomed, and yet we all know what it feels like to be welcomed, loved, and to find refuge. God calls us to welcome foreigners, aliens, strangers, and immigrants and to welcome them with a form of the commandment that Jesus gives us. We are to love our neighbor

²⁸ Regina Hassanally, interview by Kevin L. Strickland, e-mail, November 30, 2021.

²⁹ Leviticus 19:33-34 (NRSVUE).

as ourselves.”³⁰ Preacher A provides the social commentary and partisan divide. It is opinion, judgmental, and fraught with unhelpful, divisive language, not to mention that it doesn’t point the listener to what God says. Preacher B does the opposite, stating a warm welcome to the refugees and immigrants without ostracizing anyone with strong political opinions. They are doing so by reflecting on the text and context of the day.

In many ways, COVID-19 has only brought to light the plethora of pandemics that find their way into parishes each Sunday—other pandemics within a pandemic: the pandemics of racism, white supremacy, and dismissing care of creation. And yet, through our baptismal promises, we are called to hear the Word of God and proclaim the good news in Word and deed. The proclamation of the good news—God’s Word—is a weekly preaching opportunity for listeners and preachers to do just that. In the ever-growing red-and-blue divide we have in this country, we are not immune to its permeation on Sunday mornings. As Leah Schade suggests, the understanding of preaching in the purple zone is much more the space we should traverse. Schade states, “Preaching in the Purple Zone, then, takes biblical justice as a basic premise because it is the grounding orientation for all relationships—between people and God, between people and the natural world, and among people themselves. Doing ministry in the red-blue divide spurs us to ask questions about *neighbor-love*, as Cynthia Moe-Lobeda calls it.”³¹ When we preach with the basic premise of biblical justice in mind and how that grounds all human relationships, we help those who stand on a red-blue divide approach a more purple zone.

³⁰ Neither of these are direct quotes but general memories of that particular Sunday morning.

³¹ Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2019), 17–18.

Bishop Hassanally, when asked how she has seen the effects of a politically polarized, divided, and growing individualistic culture within her context (especially among congregations and pastors) commented:

Politically, our area is rather “purple.” there are some very “red” areas, some very “blue” areas, and a whole bunch of areas with both. It has been a really challenging time as people have tended to mistake knowing one thing about a person with knowing the most important things about a person. It’s led to rash judgments and a disintegration of dialogue. People seem quick to judge, quick to assume, and quick to be offended. Additionally, there does seem to be a growing sentiment around the idea *what is good for me is the most important thing*.³²

She went on to state what all preachers should keep in mind as we preach, but also all the baptized as we preach with our daily lives:

As a Christian public leader, I endeavor to use my voice pastorally and to ground what I say in theology and scripture. I rely on our biblical and theological framework to guide my leadership and draw people back to those things we share as a starting point. This framework also offers a sense of accountability beyond the personal voice. There is a system of belief and understanding outside of the personal and greater than me that guides us.³³

The Word of God has been used as a weapon to support racism and other corrosive “-isms” for far too long. As proclaimers of God’s vision, and not a myopic one, we must continue to preach that truth, even if it means swimming upstream.

To do this well, even faithfully, we must invite the person listening to the sermon into this work, the work of scriptural engagement, the result of homiletical preparation and execution, and the follow-up after the preaching act. Schade provides questions that, if asked by the preacher and allowed to be asked by every person in the congregation, would offer a significant step in the right direction to the divide that occurs from the politics of Jesus and partisan shutdown.

³² Regina Hassanally, interview.

³³ Regina Hassanally, interview.

Imagine with me if the preacher met each week with an interested group of church members before the preaching task and not only asked the following questions but did so by first reading the assigned text for the Sunday with an exposition of the biblical contexts and holding that in one hand with the daily news in the other:

Questions to ponder:

- What does God want for us?
- Where do we find similar situations in the Bible?
- Where or how do we see the Triune God at work?
- What teachings and actions of Jesus might be helpful here?
- Where/What are signs of hope that the spirit is showing us?
- What is God calling us to do?
- What kind of Christians shall we be in light of this?³⁴

Appendix B offers an “Engaging Preaching” worksheet for congregations to use. Many communities already have weekly lectionary/Bible studies. I don’t see this taking the place of that. If anything, I see this being a helpmate to that. And yes, the preacher may have to alter their sermon based on the group’s conversation and learning. That is the point.

If the preacher were more involved in the heard stories of the parishioner, that story would make all the difference in what and how a hard word might be preached, allowing the listener to participate in the homiletical work. This practice will enable the preacher to have greater insight into what congregation members may deem “political,” “partisan,” or “hard topics.” It doesn’t mean not to speak of such things, but it does mean preaching it in a way everyone can hear.

³⁴ Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, 185.

Liturgy: Baptism That Call Us Towards Justice

In Holy Baptism, we make promises and the obligation to reject, renounce, and rebel against the powers and sin that turn us against God. Racism is one of those powers and sins that does just that. Baptism is one of the most provocative acts we continue to do as a church today. It is a defiant act within a culture that seems to create divides between people. In Baptism, we are reminded that “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.”³⁵

I recently witnessed this provocative act in church and witnessed a baptism. The pastor began the liturgy and spoke the following words—words proclaimed at all Lutheran baptisms, and in hearing them, we reaffirm these promises each time:

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy Baptism:
to **live** among God’s faithful people;
to **hear** the Word of God and share in the Lord’s supper;
to **proclaim** the good news of God in Christ through Word and deed;
to **serve** all people following the example of Jesus;
and to **strive** for justice and peace in all the earth?

Response: “We do, and ask God to help and guide us.”³⁶

Sitting in that place as bishop, I desperately wanted to stand up and scream, “Do you all agree to all of this? Are you sure? That means speaking up and out against racism, sin, hatred, homophobia, etc.” Those are provocative acts in a culture that rails against challenging such. Knowing that this was a congregation that struggled with racism and homophobia made it all the harder to still silently. I held my tongue, but it took all I had. These are solemn promises we make to one another and to God. But then, the work of Baptism is what God has done, is doing, and continues to do through all of us. It puts to death all our failed attempts and strongholds of

³⁵ Galatians 3:28 (NRSV)

³⁶ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pew Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 236.

control we seek to take over another person. In reflection, my reaction was too strong. We all need to return to the waters of Baptism as often as we can. We all need reminding of our promises to, for, and with one another. It is a daily vocation.

Living among God’s faithful people is to live among *all* of God’s people. We must acknowledge our responsibility to ensure no distinction in God’s eyes and that we are all one in Christ. Amy Santoriello, a deacon and director of faith formation and outreach at Zion Lutheran Church of Penn Hills, Pennsylvania, stated, “The baptismal covenant is one way to describe faith formation, a lifelong process that doesn’t start in Sunday school and end in confirmation; it starts with our birth and ends in our burial.” She added, “Faith formation is holding [one another] to our baptismal promises that not only parents and sponsors make, but the whole community.”³⁷ Holding one another accountable to those promises serves as a reminder to the community we all share and a glimpse of what God’s kin-dom “on earth as it is in heaven” can and should be.

In Mark 12:31, as part of the Great Commandment, Jesus tells the disciples, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Our baptismal covenant mandates, “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.” After being elected bishop, I quickly realized that if I did nothing more, I had to become a more public leader and call the church under my care to the public witness we make in our baptismal promises and more concretely apply it to racism—despite any consequence. Black and brown bodies have borne far too much of racism’s burden, while white persons have remained comfortably in their privilege.

Susan Talve, the rabbi at Central Reformed Congregation in the Central West End neighborhood of St. Louis, Missouri, put forth a convicting statement that has caused me to

³⁷ Meghan Johnston Aelabouni, “Form a Faithful Foundation,” *Living Lutheran* (blog), January 12, 2018, 16, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2018/01/form-a-faithful-foundation/>.

rethink my leadership. She states, “If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem, and by complacently...sitting by, you’re as guilty as anyone else.”³⁸ She says, “If you are in a primarily white community, do your work. Understand your privilege. Dismantle your racism and figure out a way to use your privilege for good—not to hide, not to build more walls, but to use your privilege to build bridges. Take the walls down.”³⁹ That is the work necessary to swim upstream and work to eradicate racism.

It is hard, transforming, and life-giving. It also leads us to become a more “sane leader” in the process. This is hard because it challenges how we were raised and transformed. After all, when we do our work of challenging our privilege and challenge systems of oppression, we live more fully into those baptismal promises. In doing so, we realize there is more that unites us rather than what divides us. “We may be strangers or estranged, but we can become neighbors if we work together to build something good. For good.”⁴⁰

In our baptismal promises, we declare that we will “hear the word of God and proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.” This hearing and proclaiming are the work of all the baptized, not just those called to preach as pastors. Hearing and proclaiming God in Christ through Word and deed is to do as Jesus did and reach the world to see God in each person and therefore love that neighbor as ourselves for their total value, entire worth, and their race as God-given; never lesser.

³⁸ Quoted in: Leah Gunning Francis, *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2015), 45.

³⁹ Francis, 146.

⁴⁰ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose To Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017), 10.

I have always loved a good story. I love the narrative, the build-up, the climax, the ending, and the left-hanging. I love all of what goes into making a "good" story. I am even more engaged when I feel like I have a place in the story or can picture an application to my life.

Pastor Mary Caniff-Kuhn, my friend and former Program Director for Lutheridge camp in Arden, NC, always starts each devotion with, "I'd like to tell you a story." As Pastor Mary tells a story from a children's book or one passed down through the ages, she also ties it in with God's story and how we are all part of it—this story of love, grace, liberation, and life-changing truth.

Or, as Rachel Held Evans put it in her book, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*:

Jesus invites us into a story bigger than ourselves, our culture, and even our imaginations. Yet, we get to tell that story with the scandalous particularity of our particular moment and place. We are storytelling creatures because we are fashioned in the image of a storytelling God. May we never neglect the gift of that. May we never lose our love for telling the tale?⁴¹

God's great story of salvation is one we are invited into every time we gather for worship. Each time we hear sacred stories from the pages of our history as God's people, each time we hear this saving story told in song and prayer, each time we gather around bread and wine and hear those saving words once more, each time we draw close to the waters of Baptism and hear of God's cleansing water stories, and each time we are drawn into this transforming narrative in the proclamation of God's Word.

God's story has been transforming the world from the beginning. But has our worship become too sterile so as not to offend anyone or to avoid being too political? Instead, we have anesthetized the Word of God that convicts but also calls us to action. When praying, singing, and preaching, do we purposefully leave out words that could be considered political, such as

⁴¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 164.

white supremacy, racism, homophobia? When there is a school shooting the previous week, do we mention the event and prayer to end gun violence? Or do we shy away from such language so as not to offend someone?

Within the ELCA and this synods community, this is all too true. The divided polarization of our nation has seeped its way into the gathered assembly on Sunday mornings. But to have worship and for it to be good, it needs to point to ways we are called to transform the world God so loves. Or, to put it another way, James K. A. Smith writes:

And herein lies a central aspect of Christian worship: it is an alternative imaginary, a way that the Spirit of God invites us into the story of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself. But as we've seen, if such a Story is going to capture our imaginations, it needs to get into our gut—it needs to be written in our hearts. And the way to the heart is through the body.⁴²

What is central to Christian worship is that it invites us into the story of God. Still, it is more than just an invitation, an opportunity to see that worship is not for consumerism but incarnational. It is a story that writes us on its pages, and the ink becomes embodied in our daily lives.

It is not enough that we theoretically understand that we are a storied people and invited into an active involvement of worship; he supports his quote above with the story of God getting into our guts—it needs to be written in our hearts. And the way to the heart is through the body.

Worship should provide formative ways that move us to the end goal of Christian worship. As James Smith quotes Ed Phillips, who aptly puts forth:

To emphasize that Christian action is the end of *telos* of Christian worship is not to instrumentalize worship but is rather to get the Story that is enacted the drama of worship—the 'true story of the whole world' in which we are called to play our part as God's image-bearers by cultivating creation. Integral to that Story and the practice of Christian worship is the sense that we are now enabled and empowered to take up this mission precisely because of the gift of the Spirit.⁴³

⁴² James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 150.

⁴³ Smith, 153–54.

When we form people in faith to see that this is mission work, breaking down racial barriers and learning each person's story are ways that lead us to know each person as they are. A child of God is a reality.

We invite the Christian community into this mission work through our preaching and the connected tissue of the church's liturgy. Baptism, as I mentioned above, is the first call to justice in the public square and our call to eradicate racism and any other "-ism" that would separate anyone from God's love. We accompany this call not as partisan but as a connection to our theology as Lutheran Christians. Here are some other ways we attend to the assembly in this mission work.

The hymnody of the church. Through our comprehensive, expansive library of resources, a growing treasure trove of hymns accompanies the call to live out our baptismal vocations as Justice League participants. I believe the more we sing what we cannot preach, the more we proclaim what we are called to be. This understanding of the proclamation of the Word coming both in the sermon, the meal, and even what we sing derives from Martin Luther and the Reformation. During this period, Lutherans began incorporating the "Hymn of the Day," or the hymn proclaiming the Gospel. This would follow the Gospel reading or after the sermon. During that time, hymns became an opportunity to transport powerful messages of the Gospel and talk about the day's crisis.

The same is true for us today. For example, "Build a Longer Table"⁴⁴ is set to a familiar French Christmas tune, and the words are from 2018. When music is typical and even elicits blissful memories, it is often more accessible for the hymn writer to proclaim powerful, prophetic, and necessary lyrics. This hymn can be sung to address the refugee crisis around our

⁴⁴ See Appendix F.

world, the building of walls both within our country, and Israel-Palestine. It scripturally converts walls into tables, which is the one we are all invited to at the meal of Holy Communion.

Other ways of connecting liturgy with a call to action that is not partisan but offers opportunities for naming the world's pain, which does not always have to happen in preaching, are prayers of intercession, confession, lament, etc. I offer some of these examples in Appendix C. One example is from someone outside the Lutheran tradition. Still, it uses particular language for those who are white to sit in discomfort, which many of us get to deny because of the safety of our skin color.

Yolanda Pierce's "A Litany For Those Who Aren't Ready For Healing"⁴⁵ was written after a string of black men and women were targets of gun violence and unsanctioned police brutality. It is a powerful, intense, and heart-wrenching litany. Pierce does not hide behind veils but fully states a personal lived pain.

Where this is a powerful litany and even one, I have used in public worship, everything needs to be contextualized. Contextualization does not mean a refusal to tell the truth. It means telling the truth so your audience can hear and respond. So, in most of the 155+ congregations of the Southeastern Synod, this litany would close the ears of even the most "liberal" of listeners. What I would suggest is a contextualized version. What makes this contextualized, is having a perceptivity of the majority of the congregations in the synod. What would allow this to remain prayerful and useful, but not make the majority stop listening. I have removed some "buzz" words that often get coined as "political" or "partisan." However, I highlighted some words that are strong images in the author's text. Even with the imagery, they have the risk of making some refuse this as a prayer. When language needs explaining or nuanced, often it is better to remove

⁴⁵ Yolanda Pierce, "Litany for Those Who Aren't Ready for Healing," Catholic Mobilizing Network (CMN), June 26, 2020, <https://catholicmobilizing.org/resource/litany-those-who-arent-ready-healing>.

it or explain it. For instance, “reparations” is a word that is packed with politics that is partisan. It is also a phrase that needs unpacking. Or “blind” can be seen as ableist language.⁴⁶

Each worshiping community is different. As such, liturgical language needs to be contextualized. One helpful resource is *In These or Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship*.⁴⁷ This is a worship resource that I assisted with and one that I have used in teaching liturgical contextual language in congregations. It follows my suggestion how to prepare a congregation for the sermon each week, gathering with a worship team, liturgical season group, writing group, or even the whole church in the liturgical language crafting. Liturgy is the work of the people and this is the most concrete way for the people to engage that important work.

Telling our story, hearing other's stories, and genuinely being heard are what will help combat conflict (both internal and external), break down racial divides, and create engaged listeners who can move from the pulpit to the public square. In addition to the intentional connection to our baptismal language, confession, lament, and hymnody, I have also found it helpful to invite personal testimony within the worship service. Hearing from people you worship with, live with, or are in community with and the pain they carry is often the best sermon. We are doing so without shutting the door to conversation and learning by using loaded political, partisan, social justice terminology, etc.

⁴⁶ See Appendix H for a revised version of this litany.

⁴⁷ Jennifer Baker-Trinity, *In These or Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2015).

Conflict Transformation: Tearing Down Walls to Create Tables for Transformation

In the world of community organizing, there is a model that has proven productive among all types of ethnic groups: “face-to-face” meetings, now called one-on-ones, relational, or house meetings. This model emerged from the 1850s major democratic movements within the United States, much of which was the fruit of the Abolitionist movement. This is not a new movement, and for Lutherans, Martin Luther used this very thing at the forefront of the Reformation. Around the dinner table, Luther would gather with colleagues, theological opponents, students, and others. They would discuss politics, scripture, theology, and the Christian's call to action. These conversations were gathered into what later became “table talks,” face-to-face, around the dinner table, not all agreeing, but all being heard. Theological debate in the context of the call to meet the needs of the public square and conflict was transformed.

Using this model and mentality is one that I have introduced in congregational conflict that encompasses issues of racism, politics, and theological differences—where I have asked that “table talk” groups be created for this work to be accomplished. They bring people who do not see eye-to-eye but also have not worked to listen to one another. So, I invited them to try “table talks.” Their pastor first began with the scriptural conversations I had presented earlier and did that in a group setting before each week’s service. Using that core group, I then invited them to have “table talks” and follow a set agenda.⁴⁸ As these “table talk” groups take place, the advice of community organizers is crucial. Such advice as:

In the course of a house meeting, the shift from expressions of desire to exchanges of evaluative claims assumes that everyone in the discussion has the authority to propose, reject, and challenge claims as they see fit and to request reasons from others for the claims they have put forward. “What do you mean by that? Is one question that gets posed in response to the claim. Another is, “Why should I believe that?” Yet another is, “So what?” In other words, “What follows if you’re right?” One of the most essential features of a house meeting is that it gathers people who are at least somewhat upset

⁴⁸ See Appendix H, “Agenda for Table Talks.”

about how things are going and are interested in seeing them changed. It is not merely a random collection of individuals.⁴⁹

Being willing to come to the table is the first step to breaking down the walls that divide us from one another. The second step is being willing to admit you have something to learn. The third is to see God in the face of the other. “Table talk” conversations may feel scary or conflicting, but they are the pinnacle of how we grow in relationships. I have used this model now in several congregations, and I did a training on this at our fall theological conference in 2023 with over 100 pastors and deacons. Appendix D is one of the framing handouts I used for this conversation.

Fear usually prevents us from addressing conflict or misunderstanding. So, owning that fear is critical. We are surrendering to that fear or anxiety. “As we surrender our anxiety to our change how we respond to the others’ reactivity, as we dare to equip teams to pursue passionately those who do not as yet know that they are dearly loved children of God, as we trust the improvisational wind of the Holy Spirit, we may discover that we are part of God’s subversive plan to transform the world. Thus, our life together, founded in God’s love made known in Christ, will testify that we are people of the New Community of Christ.”⁵⁰ That subversive plan is rooted in baptism, and we are all submerged in its subversiveness.

One example of how fear shuts down progress, is a congregation in rural South Georgia. The members are monocultural, white, and economically middle to lower-income families. They are in a rapidly growing African-American community, but do not reach out to their neighbors and have made it clear they do not want to call an African-American pastor. Through meeting with them and getting to know their context, they have exhibited a multitude of micro-aggressive behaviors that are racially targeted. One example being that one of my African-American

⁴⁹ Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 158–59.

⁵⁰ Woolverton, *Mission Rift*, 177.

assistants preached there and a few members loudly proclaimed that they did not want “that black man or any other to preach there again.” They also shared they did not want any “preacher” who would come to their church and be “too political.”

Where not all communities are monolithic, not all innovative techniques work succinctly and easily. This was a useful reminder in this work. Where the work towards conflict transformation is crucial in the eradicating of racism and breaking down the barriers of partisan politics, it has to be done with patience. This congregation refused to work in these “table talk” groups, because they felt targeted by me as their bishop. Instead of seeing this as a helpful tool, they felt that it was punitive to their call process.

In evaluating the socio-theological landscape of this congregation, I intuited it needed a different approach. So, prior to the “table talk” methods, I then invited them with other congregations to attend an online training for diversity and justice. Inviting four to five other congregations that had much of the same demographics, allowed them to shift from the “what is wrong and what am I mad about” to the “what needs to be changed” model that Stout mentions earlier, slowing down this work, building trust, and not placing blame. Those are all helpful and pastoral approaches to the necessary skills in transforming conflict. Successes from this have been the reduction of conflict with members and the pastor, a clearer way to communicate with boundaries in the congregation, and involvement of more members in dialogue.

As a predominately white denomination in the bible belt, the ELCA cannot engage in the eradication of institutional racism, by a onetime event or program. The living out of our baptismal waters and not avoiding partisan politics. This work spans a lifetime. Therefore, this transformational kin-dom work requires a long-term, of specific formational opportunities.

Conclusion: Justice Rolling like Streams . . . From the Pulpit to the Public Square

While our country has not adequately dealt with the racism built into its systems at its founding, the church must do its part to speak out against this and preach God's radical inclusivity. From repealing unhelpful metrics to creating diversity and justice taskforces to preaching the politics of Jesus, living into our faith means directly addressing any sin we see in our lives and communities. Divisions around the human-made concept of race are an offense against our faith, which teaches that all people are made in God's image and likeness. Jesus taught us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Through his parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus made it clear that all are our neighbors. Any racial divide breaks the heart of God.

We hope not just for good to overcome evil but for God to redeem even the worst tragedies and the gravest injustices. Or as Maya Angelou said, "Do your best until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better." We must do better!

If this process is effective, I hope to observe a deeper understanding and practice of liturgical language that is contextual and addresses theological application in engaging the eradication of racism; congregations that are more engaged with a deeper understanding of scripture, the church's theology, and how that shapes our call to stand up and speak out against racism; less conflict with pastors and congregations over partisan politics language being used to define preaching; and actual feet-on-the-ground action by congregation members in fighting racism.

In evaluating and measuring this change I hope for, I plan to use ten congregations out of the 155 as "test sites" for this work throughout 2025. Five of these will be congregations that have already developed diversity and justice teams since I became bishop. The other five will be

congregations that have expressed concerns about the “pastor being too political” in speaking about racism. This will include congregations from all four states within the synod. I hope to work with them for a year, attentively listening to their stories, practices, and spiritual progress of working through conflict transformation in tumultuous areas of the political divide.

After inviting each congregation, I will ask that the pastor and one layperson meet with me via Zoom for training on the process outlined in this work, resources to accompany the work, and a timeline for the year. Each congregation is invited to have its existing diversity and justice team serve as the catalyst for this work, or a working group will be created. Each group will have a chair. The chair and pastor of each of the ten congregations will meet with me monthly for a year. Each monthly check-in will be an opportunity to evaluate what works with this model and what is not. Has conflict eased? Are people more engaged in the sermon and liturgical preparation? Is the work of breaking down systems of racism contextually relevant? At the end of the year, I then plan on gathering all ten working groups together for an in-person retreat. This retreat will give thanks for the work and offer a final evaluation. This will also be an opportunity to find ways to hone and improve this work and invite each of the ten participating congregations to mentor another congregation in their geographic area.

As Patrick Reyes has eloquently stated, “It’s not a matter of wanting to change the narrative; we must do the work to change it. We must create systems. The question is not about the technical changes necessary to make it happen. We need an entire mindset shift. We need a new imagination about our desired future.”⁵¹ I believe that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America needs to change the narrative about racism and create systems to make that possible.

⁵¹ Patrick B. Reyes, *The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 178.

We need to be a church wildly engaged in an imagination that God isn't finished with us yet and make that imagination a reality for all people.

Appendix A: Interview Questions for ELCA Bishops

1. Briefly describe yourself in whatever descriptors you use and the synod you serve (geography, congregations, ethnic make-up, etc).
2. How have you seen the effects of a politically polarized, divided, and growing individualistic culture within your context (especially among congregations and pastors)? What are the ways in which you tackle those issues?
3. How have you seen, “my pastor is being too political” used to divide the congregation? Where have you seen the pastor not being “political”, but, faithful to the keeping of baptismal promises as mentioned above? Or, where have you seen political preaching divide congregations?
4. When you think of the promises we make in baptism (mentioned above), this church’s call to combat racism, and other isms that divide persons; where do you see this being lived out well and what are ways, we can strengthen that witness?
5. In what seems like a post-truth era, what do you think is role of pastoral ministry for such a time as this?
6. In your role, as a bishop of the church, what are ways you live out your baptismal calling in rejecting, renouncing, and rebelling against the devil, sin, and powers that draw us from God?

Appendix B: Engaging Preaching Worksheet

[This exercise is to be used within the context of congregational ministry. This exercise is based on the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) and intended to be used by lay persons and the preacher prior to the preaching event. It is recommended that the group members receive the weekly handout 4-5 days before meeting. An in-person or zoom meeting occur, after the texts for the upcoming week have been read and personal reflection is done. These meetings would be around one hour in length. These can then be followed up after the preaching event with a reflection on what was heard, how was it heard, what felt hard, what left you needing to know more? Etc., This is meant to be contextual for each of your sites.]

1. **Text (Year A Season after Pentecost Proper 18 (23)):** *Read each text all the way through once. Then a second time, while you are reading, circle phrases that stand out, underline areas that make you feel uncomfortable or uneasy, and highlight information you would like to know more of.*

Romans 13:8-14 ⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. ¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 18:15-20 ¹⁵“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you,

whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

2. **Context:** *Watch at least two different news channels (local, national, global), read two different news sources (local, national, global), and listen to at least two different opinions about an issue during this week.*

3. **Questions to ponder:** *(When you gather in person as a group, start with prayer. Then share one word to describe how you feel or where you find yourself at that moment in the week. If online have someone develop a word cloud (<https://www.freewordcloudgenerator.com/>) Then read each of the assigned texts aloud. After, have each person name various things they have noticed happening in the community, nation, world. If someone has said yours, don't say it again. This is also not a time to share an opinion on an issue named. Then go through the following questions. When you have completed these, have another member pray to close you out. As an addendum, if you have the resources and or person for this, I suggest that some biblical context also be given about each text. No more than 4-6 bullet points.*
 - What does God want for us?
 - Where do we find similar situations in the Bible?
 - Where or how do we see the Triune God at work?
 - What teachings and actions of Jesus might be helpful here?
 - Where/What are signs of hope that the Spirit is showing us?
 - What is God calling us to do?
 - What kind of Christians shall we be in light of this?⁵²

⁵² Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, 185.

Example Sermon: *(The following sermon was written and preached by Bishop Kevin L. Strickland for the Day1 Protestant Radio preaching program and is aired globally. This was preached on September 6, 2020 and published online.)*

Words matter! Words have power!

As a child, I played the game “Telephone” (maybe some of you did as well) where you would whisper something into your neighbor’s ear, and then they would pass it down the line, and the last person would say aloud what they heard. The original message rarely made it to the end of the line.

The childhood game demonstrates something about living in the world with others. Whispered rumors can grow like wildfires. They can move from the lull of a whisper to the loud noise of fear that keeps us from living into the person God has called us to be.

Even the old mantra, which gives me a good eye-roll, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Whoever came up with that was never a middle schooler. I don’t know about you, but I have not practiced much on trying to figure out if sticks and stones part is true about breaking bones, but I have had more than my fair share of words that do the opposite of that saying.

Words matter! Words have power!

Words that hurt worse than that broken bone. Words that sting. Words that make you question where a person’s motives are and wondering if they love me as much as they say they do; then why do they say the things they do?

But you know we all have been on the flip side of that equation too. We have been the ones who have not always said the kindest things to those we have been called to love or even

like for that matter. As Paul reminds us in our second lesson from Romans for today: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Love does no wrong to the neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” (Romans 13:8,10)

Maybe all of us need to walk around with a mirror that has those words printed all over the front of it? Or maybe Siri or our iPhones could buzz us right before some hurtful, rude, uncaring word comes out of our mouths? Gosh, that would be a lot of buzzing around the world and in the church, huh?

What I am reminded is that we don’t live in a bubble, or by ourselves, or in some insular world. We live in community. We live as the body of Christ. Matthew’s gospel reminds us that when wrong has occurred or hurt has been done, to go and point out that fault (hurt or wrongdoing) with that person. Matthew goes on to tell us if that doesn’t work then to have that conversation with a wider audience.

Matthew states when describing the behavior of when a member of the church sins against you. But we know that church then, and I would argue now, is not the brick and mortar where people just gather; it is the ecclesia. Church then and now means to be the “called out ones.” Called out into the community of creation, so when one suffers, we all suffer. Called out to remind the world, the church, those hurt by organized religion, and ourselves; what Jesus gave as a promise of great comfort in our text: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20)

“Jesus is there among them.” “Jesus is here among you.”

Jesus is here among you and among them. Often people associate “being” the church with “going” to church. If this global pandemic has showed us anything, sometimes, all that is

necessary to be the church, to do church, is to call on Matthew 18:20 and take Jesus at his word. And oh dear ones, how better off we would be as a people if we practiced what we preach, knowing that in our words and our actions, Jesus is there among us.

“At the same time, Jesus showing up is not always good news, at least for some. The promise of Jesus’ presence, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” is comfort only insofar as you are comfortable with Jesus being that close. And I suspect some of us, if we are honest, don’t always want Jesus in such immediate proximity.”⁵³

Words matter! Words have power!

In a world where vitriolic speech is spewed in the form of tweets from national leaders, human beings beg for a better life and are labeled as less than or unworthy. We know that words matter and words have power.

In a world, where black and brown bodies are targeted, underappreciated, undervalued, underrepresented, and killed. We know that words matter and words have power.

In a world where women have words used to harass them in their workplaces, we know that words matter and words have power.

In a world where LGBTQIA+ persons struggle for a place at the table or safety, or validity from their own church bodies. We know that words matter and words have power.

In a world where young people between the ages of 13-21 are some of the highest statistics of suicides, we know that words matter and words have power.

Instead of asking, “What would Jesus do?” Maybe we should be asking, “What Would Jesus Hear?” of “What Would Jesus Think?”

⁵³ Karoline Lewis, “God Is With Us,” *Working Preacher from Luther Seminary* (blog), September 3, 2017, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/god-is-with-us>.

Perhaps it would help us live out more fully what Paul wrote, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

As Karoline Lewis points out,

Immanuel is not always the God we want—this God who insists on staying close, persists in being in the middle of what we do and say, especially when it comes to those things we do and say in God’s name. There are many ways we can imagine who God is, but when who God is ends up also being where God is, well, that’s theology best left in our theology books, gathering dust in our libraries. Because a God whose primary identity is that God is? Well, that’s a God we won’t be able to pin down, systemize, and control. Immanuel is often far more difficult to confess than we are willing to admit. No wonder Jesus will then have to make this promise again, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”⁵⁴

Words matter! Words have power!

Because of that, speaking words of love and truth and truth to power also comes in the form of speaking words of forgiveness. There is this great scene in *Angela’s Ashes*, where Frank confesses all of his life’s sins to the priest. The priest tells him: “God forgives you, and you must forgive yourself. God loves you and you must love yourself. For only when you love God and yourself can you love all of God’s creatures.”

Loving ourselves, forgiving ourselves, using words that honor and uplift ourselves; those are the things we have to do first, and then we begin to fully live into and love into the whole community of Christ and his body within our neighbors. Not easy work, but heart work. It is work that frees us from being burdened.

Delighted, loved, and called into a new beginning; we in the church hear and proclaim words that matter and know that words have power. In Holy Baptism, we remind and are reminded that God has called us by name and delighted in us. We who the world or politicians or

⁵⁴ Lewis.

others would insult, deface, or defame; we know different. We hear that just as Israel receives a new name, the Christian does too, beloved child of God, the one in whom God delights.

We in the church know that words matter and words have power. Words that transcend ordinary people into children of God, that give thanks over bread and wine for Eucharist sharing, stories of saving acts and acts of love to be shared and given for all to receive: the outsider, the Gentile, the tax collector, you and me.

So, what does it take to quell those whispers and still that fear inside each of us? To speak to those voices and to that fear and say, “I have trusted in you, O Lord; you are my God”? It takes the promise that amid our greatest fears or fiercest opponents, God hears us and speaks a louder voice of love—I am here among you!

Words matter! Words have power!

So dear friends, may we speak words with God’s power to a world and a people in need of reminding that God delights in us and calls us God’s own forever. Amen.

Appendix C: Various Worship Resources

I wrote many and or assembled these while serving as the Assistant to the Presiding Bishop and Executive for Worship of the ELCA from 2014-2019, prior to my being elected bishop.

Confession and Forgiveness⁵⁵

Gracious God, we thank you for making one human family of all the peoples of the earth and for creating all the wonderful diversity of cultures.

Enrich our lives by ever-widening circles of fellowship and show us your presence in those who differ most from us.

From the bondage of racism that denies the humanity of every human being and the prejudices within us

that deny the dignity of those who are oppressed, Lord set us free:

Lord, have mercy.

From racism that blinds oppressors to the destruction caused by the spirit and practice of racial injustice, Christ set us free:

Christ, have mercy.

From the racism that will not recognize the work of your Spirit in other cultures: Lord set us free:

Lord, have mercy.

Forgive those of us who have been silent and apathetic in the face of racial intolerance and bigotry,

both overt and subtle, public and private.

And take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts.

Break down the walls that separate us.

And help us to find that unity that is the fruit of righteousness and will enable us to become your beloved community.

Empower us to speak boldly for justice and truth and help us to deal with one another without hatred or bitterness, working together with mutual forbearance and respect.

And work through our struggles and confusion to accomplish your purposes.

⁵⁵ Adapted from the United Church of Christ's "Prayers for Racial Justice Sunday" (www.ucc.org/worship/ways).

O God of unconditional love,
 you who show no partiality in respect to people or nations,
 we have heard your good news of great joy for all the people.
 We hear that good news, and in hearing, believe.
 We know that your sanctuary is a house of worship for all people,
 with no regard for the color of our skin.
 As we worship you, knit us into a people,
 a seamless garment of many colors.
 May we celebrate our unity, made whole in our diversity.
 Forgive us for our inability to let our “old selves” die to the world.

We acknowledge that we participate in structures that are inherently racist,
 and yet we so often do nothing to remedy it.
 Show us we fail when we judge others according to the color of their flesh.

God, who is rich in mercy, loves us even when we were dead in sin, and made us alive
 together with Christ. By grace you have been saved. In the name of +Jesus Christ, your sins
 are forgiven. Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit, that Christ
 may live in your hearts through faith.

Amen.

Or an alternate suggestion is:

A Litany For Those Who Aren't Ready For Healing (Revised)⁵⁶

Additional Prayers of Intercession:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with
 compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our
 hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unites us in bonds of love; and, through our
 struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth; so that, in your good
 time, every people and nation may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer.

Out of the darkness we cry to you, O God. Enable us to find in Christ the faith to trust your
 care even in the midst of pain. Assure us that we do not walk alone through the valley of the
 shadow, but that your light is leading us into life.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer.

O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety is
 infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where impossibilities close every door

⁵⁶ See Appendix H.

and window, grant imagination and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings and strengthened dreams.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer.

O God, call us into a deeper relationship to be your church for the sake of the world. Help us to see with new eyes the injustices within church and society. Call us to have a loving heart that respects and uplifts the humanity and dignity of every person; open our ears to listen to and learn from the experiences of people of color. Open our mouths to speak up and about injustices. Join us with others to work for racial equity and inclusion for all people.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer

Additional Resources

The following prayers from Evangelical Lutheran Worship⁵⁷ may be appropriately inserted into the prayers of the people, used in pastoral care situations, or drawn upon at other opportunities for prayer around the devastation of crises.

Time of civic mourning

God our creator, through whose providing care we enjoy all goodness and life, turn our eyes to your mercy in this time of confusion and loss. Comfort this nation as we mourn; shine your light on those whose only companion is darkness, and teach us all so to number our days that we may apply our hearts to your wisdom; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Social justice

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may move every human heart; that the barriers dividing us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease and that, with our divisions healed, we might live in justice and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For a peaceful night

Dear Jesus, as a hen covers her chicks with her wings to keep them safe, protect us this night under your golden wings; for your mercy's sake. Amen.

Those in emotional distress

Merciful God, you give us the grace that helps in time of need. Surround *name* with your steadfast love and lighten *her/his* burden. By the power of your Spirit, free *her/him* from distress and give *her/him* a new mind and heart made whole in the name of the risen Christ. Amen.

⁵⁷ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

Those who suffer abuse and violence

Holy One, you do not distance yourself from the pain of your people, but in Jesus you bear that pain with all who suffer at others' hands. With your cleansing love bring healing and strength to *name*, and by your justice, lift *her/him* up, that in body, mind and spirit, *she/he* may again rejoice. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Those in trouble or bereavement

Almighty God, your love never fails, and you can turn the shadow of death into daybreak. Help us to receive your word with believing hearts, so that, confident in your promises, we may have hope and be lifted out of sorrow into the joy and peace of your presence; through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Anxiety, apprehension, fear

O most loving Father, you want us to give thanks in all circumstances and to lay all our cares on you, knowing that you care for us. Grant that fears and anxieties in this mortal life may not hide from us the light of your immortal love shown to us in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bitterness, anger

Lord God, when we are assaulted by the troubles of life, and the deep waters of anger threaten to overwhelm us, do not let us sink. In your great compassion, hear us and help us. Deliver us from anger's power over us. Lead us out of bitter silence and hurtful words so that we may speak the truth in love. Heal every heart set on vengeance, and show us the way to honesty and reconciliation; through the one who has shown us both impassioned zeal and forgiving love, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Discouragement, despair

God our comforter, you are a refuge and a strength for us, a helper close at hand in times of distress. Enable us so to hear the words of faith that our fear is dispelled, our loneliness eased, our anxiety calmed, and our hope reawakened. May your Holy Spirit lift us above our sorrow to the peace and light of your constant love; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Guidance, protection

O God, full of compassion, we commit and commend ourselves to you, in whom we live and move and have our being. Be the goal of our pilgrimage, and our rest by the way. Give us refuge from the turmoil of worldly distractions beneath the shadow of your wings. Let our hearts, so often a sea of restless waves, find peace in you, O God; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Suffering abuse or violence

Holy One, you do not distance yourself from the pain of your people, but in Jesus you bear that pain with all who suffer at others' hands. With your cleansing love bring healing and strength to *name*; and by your justice, lift *her/him* up, that in body, mind and spirit, *she/he* may again rejoice. In Jesus' name we pray.

Isolation, loneliness

Merciful God, our Father, in the stillness of our souls we listen for your voice to know again that you are God. Quiet our restless hearts with the knowledge that you stand within the shadows,

keeping watch over your own. Rekindle our faith and light the lamp of hope within our hearts. Then deal with us as seems best to you, for where you lead we can confidently go with Jesus Christ our Lord.

O Lord our God, you see and know and feel the pain of the world. Look upon us when we feel alone, and enfold us with your love, that in the midst of pain we may know your presence; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Blessed Lord, in moments of pain we turn to you for strength; in times of loneliness we seek your loving nearness. Grant that your life and love and joy may flow through us for the healing of others in Jesus' name.

Time of conflict, crisis, disaster

God, our refuge and strength, you have bound us together in a common life. In all our conflicts, help us to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, to listen for your voice amid competing claims, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We pray to you almighty God, in this time of _____. You are our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Do not let us fail in the face of these events. Uphold us with your love, and give us the strength we need. Help us in our confusion, and guide our actions. Heal the hurt, console the bereaved and afflicted, protect the innocent and helpless, and deliver any who are still in peril; for the sake of your great mercy in Jesus Christ our Lord.

A prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

These hymns are found in the JUSTICE, PEACE; CONFESSION, FORGIVENESS; TRUST, GUIDANCE; HEALING; GRIEF, SORROW; GRACE, FAITH; RECONCILIATION sections of Evangelical Lutheran Worship.⁵⁸

247	Come now, O Prince of peace	626	By gracious powers
358	Great God, your love has called us	646	The peace of the Lord

⁵⁸ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

262	Wait for the Lord	651	Oh, praise the gracious power
266	All earth is hopeful	673	God, whose almighty word
323	God loved the world	684	Creating God, your fingers trace
325	I want Jesus to walk with me	690	We raise our hands to you, O Lord
328	Restore in us, O God	697	Just a closer walk with thee
331	As the deer runs to the river	698	How long, O God
333	Jesus is a rock in a weary land	699	In deepest night
335	Jesus, keep me near the cross	700	Bring Peace to Earth Again
354	Calvary	702	You, dear Lord
439	Soon and very soon	703	O God, why are you silent
479	We come to the hungry feast	704	Where pain of the world surrounds us
482	I come with joy	712	Lord, who love in humble service
502	The King of love my shepherd is	716	Lord of all nations, grant me grace
523	Let us go now to the banquet	726	Light dawns on a weary world
530	Here, O Lord, your servants gather	735	Mothering God, you gave me birth
546	To be your presence	753	Dona nobis pacem
561	Joyous Light of heavenly glory	759	My faith looks up to thee
572	Now it is evening	763	My life flows on in endless song
581	You Are Mine	769	If you but trust in God to guide you
600	Out of the depths I cry to you	770	Give Me Jesus
603	God, when human bonds are broken	773	Precious Lord, take my hand
605	Forgive our sins as we forgive	777	Come to me, all pilgrims thirsty
606	Our Father, we have wandered	784	Grace peace, we pray, in mercy, Lord

607	Come, ye disconsolate	788	If God my Lord be for me
612	Healer of our every ill	790	Day by day
613	Thy holy wings	801	Change my heart, O God
614	There is a balm in Gilead	808	Lord Jesus, you shall be my song
615	In all our grief	841	Lift every voice and sing
622	Neither death nor life	860	I'm so glad Jesus lifted me
624	Jesus, still lead on	871	Sing praise to God, the highest good
626	By gracious powers	882	My soul does magnify the Lord
632	O God, our help in ages past	887	This is my song
633	We've come this far by faith	889	The right hand of God
635	We walk by faith		

If used within the context of a service of Holy Communion, the following Eucharistic Prayer from Evangelical Lutheran Worship⁵⁹ is suggested:

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, you have brought us this far along the way. In times of bitterness you did not abandon us, but guided us into the path of love and light. In every age you sent prophets to make known your loving will for all humanity. The cry of the poor has become your own cry; our hunger and thirst for justice is your own desire.

In the fullness of time, you sent your chosen servant to preach good news to the afflicted, to break bread with the outcast and despised, and to ransom those in bondage to prejudice and sin.

In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.

For as often as we eat of this bread and drink from this cup we proclaim the Lord's death

⁵⁹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

until he comes.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Remembering, therefore, his death and resurrection, we await the day when Jesus shall return to free all the earth from the bonds of slavery and death. Come, Lord Jesus! And let the church say, Amen.

Amen.

Remembering, therefore, his death and resurrection, we await the day when Jesus shall return to free all the earth from the bonds of slavery and death. Come, Lord Jesus! And let the church say, Amen.

Amen.

Send your Holy Spirit, our advocate, to fill the hearts of all who share this bread and cup with courage and wisdom to pursue love and justice in all the world. Come, Spirit of freedom! And let the church say, Amen.

Amen.

Join our prayers and praise with your prophets and martyrs of every age, that, rejoicing in the hope of the resurrection, we might live in the freedom and hope of your Son. Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, now and forever. **Amen.**

A Service of Repentance and Mourning⁶⁰

+ **Gathering** +

The assembly gathers in silence.

A Prayer for Forgiveness

Depending on the context in which this prayer is used, a word of God's forgiveness may be added by the leader or expressed later in the service.

Gracious God, we thank you for making one human family of all the peoples of the earth and for creating all the wonderful diversity of cultures.

Enrich our lives by ever-widening circles of fellowship and show us your presence in those who differ most from us.

For the racism which denies dignity to those who are different, Lord, forgive us:

Lord, have mercy.

For the racism which recognizes prejudice in others and never in ourselves, Christ, forgive us:

Christ, have mercy.

⁶⁰ Adapted from the United Church of Christ's "Prayers for Racial Justice Sunday" (www.ucc.org/worship/ways).

For the racism which will not recognize the work of your Spirit in other cultures, Lord, forgive us:

Lord, have mercy.

Forgive those of us who have been silent and apathetic in the face of racial intolerance and bigotry, both overt and subtle, public and private.

And take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts.

Break down the walls that separate us.

And help us to find that unity that is the fruit of righteousness and will enable us to become your beloved community.

Empower us to speak boldly for justice and truth and help us to deal with one another without hatred or bitterness, working together with mutual forbearance and respect.

And work through our struggles and confusion to accomplish your purposes.

O God of unconditional love,

you who show no partiality in respect to people or nations,

we have heard your good news of great joy for all the people,

We hear that good news, and in hearing, believe.

We know that your sanctuary is a house of worship for all people,
with no regard for the color of our skin.

As we worship you, knit us into a people,

a seamless garment of many colors.

May we celebrate our unity, made whole in our diversity.

Forgive us for our inability to let our "old selves" die to the world.

We acknowledge that we participate in structures that are inherently racist,
and yet we do nothing to remedy it.

Show us when we fail when we judge others according to the color of their flesh.

Amen.

Gathering Song

(see list of suggested hymns below)

Greeting and Opening Prayer

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

We pray to you, almighty God, in this time of conflict. You are our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Do not let us fail in the face of these events. Uphold us with your love, and give us the strength we need. Help us in our confusion, and guide our action. Heal the hurt, console the bereaved and afflicted, protect the innocent and helpless, and deliver any who are still in peril; for the sake of your great mercy in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

+ Word +

One or more readings may be used.

Psalm 30

Psalm 91 (assurance of God's protection)

Isaiah 41:10 (fear not, I am with you)

Lamentations 1:1-3 (the city weeps bitterly)

Matthew 5:1-10

Romans 8:31-35, 37-39 (who will separate us from the love of Christ?)

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 (God comforts us in our sorrows)

1 John 3:1-3; 18-24

Meditation

Silence for reflection.

Song

(see list of suggested hymns below)

Remembering Those Who Have Died

Congregations may find it appropriate to remember those who died. The following rite has been adapted to be included in the Sunday worship of the assembly. The rite may be used at the gathering, after the hymn of the day or after the prayers of intercession. For an extended order of worship to be used as a separate worship service see Occasional Services for the Assembly, p. 344. As each name is read, silence is kept.

The leader begins with these or similar words.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of all mercy and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our sorrows so that we can comfort others in their sorrows with the consolation we ourselves have received from God.

On this somber day, we trust in the expectation of the resurrection to eternal life, as we remember this day those who died in the Charleston shooting and who now rest from their labors, especially those family members and friends who are dear to us.

Let us pray. O God, we remember with thanksgiving those who have loved and served you on earth, who now rest from their labors, especially **Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, the Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, the Hon. Rev. Clementa Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, the Rev. Daniel Simmons Sr., the Rev. Sharonda Singleton, Myra Thompson.**

Keep us in union with all your saints, and bring us with them to the joyous feast of heaven; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

*These petitions and others (see below) may be offered as the prayers of the people, ending each petition with: Lord in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.***

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and, through our struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth; so that, in your good time, every people and nation may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne.

Holy One, you do not distance yourself from the pain of your people, but in Jesus you bear that pain with all who suffer at others' hands. With your cleansing love bring healing and strength to the people of Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Charleston, S.C.; and by your justice, lift them up, that in body, mind and spirit, they may again rejoice.

Out of the darkness we cry to you, O God. Enable us to find in Christ the faith to trust your care even in the midst of pain. Assure us that we do not walk alone through the valley of the shadow, but that your light is leading us into life.

Gracious God, your Son called on you to forgive his enemies while he was suffering shame and death. In these difficult times, lead our enemies and us from prejudice to truth; deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you. We pray for Dylann Roof that he may know of your love and find forgiveness in you.

We pray for the Roof family and St. Paul Lutheran Church of Columbia, S.C., in their grief.

For the families who grieve loss of loved ones who have been murdered in this senseless tragedy in Charleston, S.C., we pray, grant these saints rest eternal, O God, as they now rest in you. We await the day when this world will know of your great Shalom and all your saints will be gathered with you.

Into your hands, O God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

Lord's Prayer

+ **Sending** +

Blessing

Sending Song

(see list of suggested hymns below)

Peace

Appendix D: “Table Talk” Handout



“God has called us for such a time as this, for such a place as the one where we are. It is that call that compels us to stand in the rift of conflict—where our greatest fears and fiercest foes come face-to-face with the divine mission and the Messiah, who bids us to ‘come and see’ what God is up to. In that

Small Group Conversation

- Who are you becoming? Experiences shape us for new insight. What has your own life experience taught you about conflict? What do you choose to learn from those experiences? What continued growth did you seek? What new skills in dealing with conflict do you plan to develop?
- What “images” do you assign to conflict? (moth to a fire, ship is sinking, etc?) What does that image say about how you encounter conflict?
- In your current context, what are the conflicts that you are swimming in? What does transformation look like from that conflict? What in you is standing in the way of transforming that conflict? Could God be birthing something new out of the labor pains of that conflict?



“Likewise, today, midwifery can be appropriate image for the role of helping people through the painful work of conflict. We cannot give birth for another, but we can be there; we can struggle with them and guide them through the danger. We can help a whole people cry out to God in anguish and say, “Do not be afraid.” There is no way back; there is no way except through the conflict, with the promise of birth and new life.”---Norma Cook Everist “Church Conflict: From Contention to Collaboration”

Transformational Conflict Leader:

- Reflection
- Boundaries
- Resistance
- Projection
- Transference
- Postures
- Adaptive Change (Mission not Technical Fix)
- Reframing

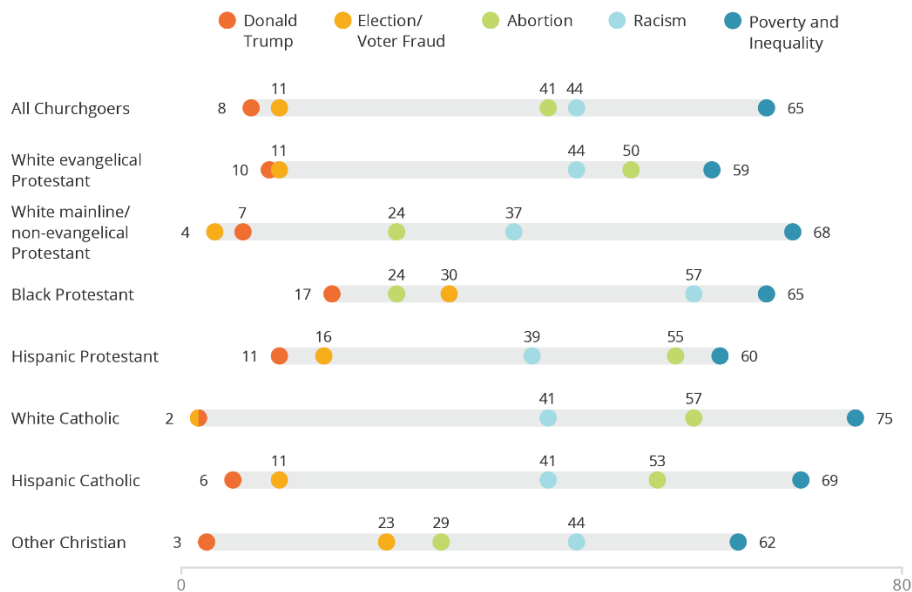
PRAYER: *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are every with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. –Thomas Merton*

Appendix E: Figures

Figures from “Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval.”⁶¹

FIGURE 13. Frequency of Discussing Political Topics, by Religious Affiliation

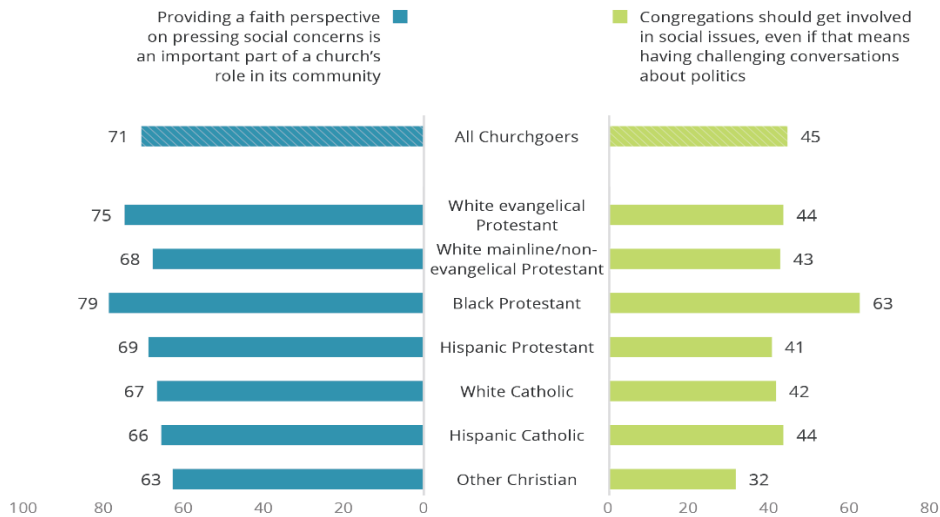
Percent who say their church discusses the topic often or sometimes:



Source: PRRI, Health of Congregations Survey, 2022.

FIGURE 16. Church’s Role in Providing a Faith Perspective on Social Issues vs. Getting Involved

Percent who agree with the statement:



Source: PRRI 2022 Health of Congregations Survey.

⁶¹ PRRI, “Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval.”

Appendix F: “Build a Longer Table”

Gathering Hymn: “Build A Longer Table” ⁶²

Build a longer table, not a higher wall,
Feeding those who hunger, making room for all.
Feasting together, stranger turns to friend,
Christ breaks walls to pieces, false divisions end.

Build a safer refuge, not a larger jail;
Where the weak find shelter, mercy will not fail.
For any place where justice is denied,
Christ will breach the jail wall, freeing all inside.

Build a broader doorway, not a longer fence,
Love protects all people, sparing no expense.
When we embrace compassion more than fear,
Christ tears down our fences; all are welcome here.

When we lived as exiles, refugees abroad,
Christ became our doorway to the reign of God.
So must our tables welcome those who roam.
None can be excluded; all must find a home.

⁶² *All Creation Sings: Pew Edition* (Minneapolis: MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2020), 1062.

Appendix G: Agenda for Table Talks

- Commit to four Sunday afternoons or evenings as a small group. At the end of the four weeks, then invite everyone to reflect on their experiences with one another. Close the time with a worship service.
- Meet for at least one hour and do so over a meal.
- Invite the African Methodist Episcopal Church neighbors to join for dinner and conversation. Start with something neutral and positive. Begin with each person's introductions. Have each table group read the text and make sure the table groups are diverse and different. Have one person at each table be the facilitator. For instance, gathering during the season of Advent, use the assigned Old Testament reading for each meeting, read that, and offer time for group reflection:
 - What did the text say to you?
 - In these Advent days, what does hope look like for you?
 - What do you struggle with as a pilgrim on the journey?
 - When have you felt like a foreigner, alien, stranger, outcast? Those who have been far off? When have you made others feel that way?
 - Close each session with prayer and song.

Appendix H: A Litany For Those Who Aren't Ready For Healing⁶³ (Revised)

Let us not rush to the language of healing before understanding the fullness of the injury and the depth of the wound.

Let us not rush to offer a band-aid when the gaping wound requires surgery and complete reconstruction.

Let us not offer false equivalencies, thereby diminishing the pain being felt in a particular circumstance in a particular historical moment.

Let us not speak of reconciliation without speaking of reparations and restoration, or how we can repair the breach and how we can restore the loss.

Let us not rush past the loss of this mother's child, this father's child ... someone's beloved son.

Let us not value property over people; let us not protect material objects while human lives hang in the balance.

Let us not value a false peace over a righteous justice.

Let us not be afraid to sit with the ugliness, the messiness, and the pain that is life in community together.

Let us not offer clichés to the grieving, those whose hearts are being torn asunder.

Instead ...

Let us mourn black and brown men and women, those killed ~~extrajudicially every 28 hours~~ almost daily.

Let us lament the loss of ~~a teenager, dead at the hands of a police officer who described him as a demon~~ teenagers and children from senseless violence.

Let us weep at a criminal justice system, which is neither blind nor just.

Let us call for the mourning men and the wailing women, those willing to rend their garments of privilege and ease, and sit in the ashes of this nation's original sin.

Let us be silent when we don't know what to say.

Let us be humble and listen to the pain, rage and grief pouring from the lips of our neighbors and friends.

Let us decrease, so that our ~~brothers and sisters~~ siblings who live on the underside of history may increase.

Let us pray with our eyes open and our feet firmly planted on the ground.

Let us listen ~~to the shattering glass and let us smell the purifying fires,~~ Let us learn, for it is the language of the unheard.

⁶³ Revised from Pierce, "Litany for Those Who Aren't Ready for Healing."

God, in your mercy ...

Show me my own complicity in injustice.

Convict me for my indifference.

Forgive me when I have remained silent.

Equip me with a zeal for righteousness.

ALL: Never let me grow accustomed or acclimated to unrighteousness.

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