



Greater Milwaukee Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's Work. Our Hands.

A Pastoral Letter on White Supremacy and Systemic Racism
Bishop Paul Erickson
Greater Milwaukee Synod, ELCA
June 5, 2020

*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long. (Psalm 25:1-5)*

Friends in Christ:

As the events of recent days have rapidly unfolded, and countless protests against the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis have erupted, I have sought to listen, learn, and follow. I recognize that the anger and frustration that have filled the streets of our cities are not just about one man in one neighborhood, but about one more example of a long history of white supremacy, racial discrimination, and systemic violence that goes back to the very foundations of this country.

All of this is taking place while we are still dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic, causing many to refer to the history of racial violence and injustice as a pandemic of racism. There are many commonalities; racism has a global reach and is impacting every area of our lives, just like the virus. In addition, though we may long for the time when both pandemics will subside and we will find a way to go “back to normal,” it is becoming clear that the future will not be a return to what was, and that’s good news. The Coronavirus pandemic has served as a global stress test, revealing the weaknesses and injustices of our relationships, our institutions, even our theologies. The disparities that have long been present in our systems and institutions related to health care, the environment, the economy, and education are being painfully revealed, and I pray we will find a way to resolve these inequities and construct a more just and compassionate world. It’s also becoming clear, as the protests continue in cities across the country, that the national dialogue is expanding beyond the specific situation in Minneapolis to address white supremacy, racial violence, and the need for lasting and substantial reform, not just to how our police forces operate, but to how we organize every aspect of our common life. We can’t return to what “normal” used to be, because that “normal” was killing our siblings of color.

As a white, male leader in the whitest denomination in the country, I recognize and confess the ways that I have perpetuated the system of white supremacy and systemic racism, both in what I have done and in what I have left undone. I have not found a way to have a synod staff that reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of our synod; I have not given adequate space for the voices and experiences of our African-American and other leaders of color to shape our common life and ministry; I have not always known when to lead and when to follow; when to listen and when to speak; when to lament and when to protest.

“How many deaths will it take ‘til they know that too many people have died?” Those of us old enough to remember this song of the ‘60s and ‘70s will recall that “the answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.” I used to think that this was a pessimistic refrain, indicating that the answers we seek are always eluding us, beyond our grasp, blowing in the wind somewhere, out there. I would now invite us to imagine, in the spirit of Pentecost, that the answers we seek, and the changes we need, are blowing through the streets of our cities and towns, and that God’s Holy and righteous Spirit is descending upon us as tongues of fire. While I decry the flames that have destroyed businesses and homes, I pray that the fires of God’s righteous anger and holy wisdom will not be put out. I also pray that we will grow in our commitment to being an anti-racist synod. Specifically, I commit to the following:

1. We will continue to find ways to deepen and expand our anti-racism work. Please explore the resources available on the synod website at <https://milwaukee-synod.org/anti-racism/>.
2. In recognition that anti-racism training is but an initial step in a lifelong journey, the staff of the Greater Milwaukee Synod has committed to an ongoing process of reflection and engagement, in dialogue with people of color, to explore how our attitudes, behaviors, and structures can more closely align with God’s agenda of racial reconciliation and justice.
3. We will provide resources and support to our rostered ministers and congregations as they engage in the work of combatting and deconstructing racism. To those who believe this work makes the church too political, I would suggest that the work of God’s reign, the work of loving our neighbor, calls us to be concerned for our common life as a society, and as such the Gospel propels us into the public sphere. We need to avoid becoming partisan, aligning ourselves too closely with any political party or partisan agenda, but God’s love is public.
4. Personally, I pledge to listen, lead, and love in a way that honors the deep wounds of people and communities of color and seeks to contribute to the deep and lasting healing that God is inviting us into.

Through it all, my deepest prayer is that God will continue to teach us, guide us, and agitate us to follow the winds of the Holy and disrupting Spirit as we join together in dismantling human structures and relationships based on hatred, division, and fear. I pray that God will not let us rest until our synod’s vision statement “A world that embodies the fullness of life: justice, peace, equity, hope, and love for everyone, including all races, genders, identities, abilities, and social status” becomes more than words on a page, but the new normal for us all.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Paul D. Erickson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Bishop Paul D. Erickson