

November 1, 2007

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ:

On this All Saints Day we remember the saints who have gone before us and give thanks for their lives of faith and commitment. I particularly ask you to join me in giving thanks for all whose faith has led them to take a stand on civil rights, including Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the thousands of others, including many clergy and lay leaders in this church, who risked and sacrificed because of their belief that all people are made in God's image.

As presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), I am deeply troubled by the number of incidents in the last three years that involve symbols and acts of racial hatred. I write to you today with grave concern about the "spiritual crisis concerning race relations"¹ that we continue to experience in this country. This spiritual crisis affects both church and society and calls us to respond with the urgency and strength as those who have gone before us. As the ELCA social statement, "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture," says, "We are torn between becoming the people God calls us to be and remaining the people we are, barricaded behind old walls of hostility."²

Today, public displays of nooses as well as acts of kidnapping, torture, and sexual assault are replacing burning crosses as symbols of racial hatred. Nooses are intentional symbols of racial hatred tied to slavery and lynching during the "Jim Crow" (i.e., racial segregation) era of this country's history. Use of these racial symbols has increased in recent months, intended to create fear and intimidation in communities of African Descent³. In addition, racial profiling by law enforcement continues. A particular concern is "DWB" (driving while Black or Brown) and "DWM" (driving while Muslim), shorthand phrases for police stops of people of color.

Through that social statement, this church calls upon its leaders to "name the sin of racism and lead us in our repentance of it" and to "persevere in their challenge to [this church] to be in mission and ministry in a multicultural society."⁴ It also calls this church to a time of public deliberation, asking all of us to:

- Model an honest engagement with issues of race, ethnicity, and culture, by being a community of mutual conversation, mutual correction, and mutual consolation;
- Encourage and participate in the education of young people, [so] they might be better equipped to live in a multicultural society; and
- Bring together parties in conflict, creating space for deliberation....⁵

This social statement also calls this church to public witness and says, "Participation in public life is essential to doing justice and undoing injustice. Only when people affected by racial and ethnic division speak publicly of painful realities, does there emerge the possibility of justice for everyone."⁶

On this All Saints Day, I call on members of this church of all races to remember and give thanks for those who have gone before us, especially those who have suffered from racism and injustice, and to stand in opposition to this evil spreading across our country. Let us together:

- Pray for racial reconciliation and peace;

¹ ELCA Department for Studies, Division for Church in Society, "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993), p. 3.

² Ibid, p. 3.

³ The term "African Descent" is used to describe and bring together people who are African, African American, and Caribbean.

⁴ ELCA, "Freed in Christ," p. 5.

⁵ Ibid, p. 7.

⁶ Ibid, p. 6.

- Encourage all ELCA congregations to be in conversation with each other about issues of racial justice and reconciliation;
- Engage, listen to, learn from, and build relationships with people of color—those most affected—in our communities;
- Speak out against hate crimes and other racial injustices in our communities and work to strengthen legislation that supports and protects civil rights; and
- Amplify our voices by signing up for ELCA E-Advocacy to receive information about opportunities to speak.⁷

On this All Saints Day, “Therefore, we confess our sinfulness. Because we are sinners as well as saints, we rebuild walls broken down by Christ. We fall back into enslaving patterns of injustice. We betray the truth that sets us free. Because we are saints as well as sinners, we reach for the freedom that is ours in Christ.”⁸

Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop

⁷ The Web address for E-Advocacy sign-up is www.elca.org/advocacy

⁸ ELCA, "Freed in Christ," p. 2.