

# **Background of the Declaration of the ELCA To People of African Descent and “Now Is the Time” Study**

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

## **The who:**

“African Descent Ministries of the ELCA” refers to people whom self-identify as Black, African Caribbean, African American, African Nationals and others of African ancestry from numerous countries who now live in the United States. It is a network of about 255 congregations that report 49,000 people of African descent as active participants in the ELCA across the United States, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. They are engaging, involving and investing in the gifts, interests and capacity of people of African descent in every aspect of the life of this church.

## **The request:**

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

## **The apology:**

In the declaration, adopted at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, the ELCA “apologizes to people of African descent for its historical complicity in slavery and its enduring legacy of racism in the United States and globally. We lament the white church’s failure to work for the abolition of slavery and the perpetuation of racism in this church.”

## **The study:**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America introduced “Now Is the Time: A Study Guide for ELCA Declaration to People of African Descent” to help congregations wrestle with the meaning of the declaration, and its accompanying explanation. “Now Is the Time” stresses realism, self-examination and accountability as the church acknowledges and apologizes for the history and impact of slavery and systemic racism. The study guide focuses on deepening our understanding of this history as participants engage in often-difficult conversation and reflection to move the church toward racial healing and justice.



**East Central Synod of Wisconsin**  
Racial Equity Team

# DECLARATION OF THE ELCA TO PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

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

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

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) apologizes to people of African descent for its historical complicity in slavery and its enduring legacy of racism in the United States and globally. We lament the white church’s failure to work for the abolition of slavery and the perpetuation of racism in this church. We confess, repent and repudiate the times when this church has been silent in the face of racial injustice.

The ELCA acknowledges that slavery created and perpetuated racism, a truth this nation and this church have yet to fully embrace. The enslavement of Africans was based on a false narrative of the racial inferiority and the demonization of black people by the majority culture. Slavery was supported by white religious, legal, political, and scientific leaders and institutions for social, political, and economic gain. During the 246-year transatlantic slave trade, which began in 1619, an estimated 12 million people from Africa were stolen from their native lands, separated from their families, torn from their culture, killed for seeking freedom, tortured through inhumane forms of punishment, and subjected to lifetimes of captivity. While the white church stood silently by, people of African descent resisted through acts of rebellion, created new expressions of spirituality and Christian practice rooted in African traditions, and organized movements for freedom.

The ELCA teaches that racism is sin and that racism denies the reconciling work of the cross. Rooted in slavery, racism is manifested through the history of Jim Crow policies, racial segregation, the terror of lynching, extrajudicial killings by law enforcement, and the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. Descendants of formerly enslaved Africans are still denied equal access and opportunity in church and society while white people collectively benefit from unequal access, opportunity, and power. Institutional racism currently exists in the ELCA through discriminatory treatment within the call process; inequitable compensation of clergy of color; racial segregation; divestment from black communities and congregations; systemic policies and organizational practices; and failure to fully include the gifts of leadership and worship styles of people of African descent.

The ELCA trusts that repentance begins and ends with the work of a gracious God. In prayerful response to the African Descent Lutheran Association’s request for an apology, this church enters into a season of confession and lamentation. Beyond empty promises or well-meaning intentions, this church recommits to the work of racial justice, socioeconomic equity, and racial reconciliation. This apology is a recommitment to the process of right and equitable relations within this church, and the flourishing of Christ’s church universal. This recommitment means working toward a deeper understanding of slavery and its legacy, of institutional and structural racism, of white privilege, and of attitudes and foundations of white supremacy. It means praying for the renewal of this church as disciples of the living Christ.