



Freed in Christ: *Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*

by Victor Thasiah

FACING GOD

- ☞ A Time of Vision
- ☞ A Time of Confession
- ☞ A Time of Commitment
- ☞ A Time of Spiritual Crisis

FACING OBSTACLES

- ☞ A Time to Take Culture Seriously
- ☞ A Time to Confront Racism
- ☞ A Time to Be the Church

DOING JUSTICE

- ☞ A Time for Public Leadership
- ☞ A Time for Public Witness
- ☞ A Time for Public Deliberation
- ☞ A Time for Advocacy

This ELCA social statement and accompanying study guide are available for free download at www.elca.org/socialstatements. You can order a free printed copy online at that address or by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2996.

In 1993, the ELCA adopted *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*. As this church continues to engage these issues in its life, mission, and ministry, it's important to know about this early social statement.

The document begins by acknowledging one God and one Lord, Jesus Christ, and one humanity created by God. It also affirms that "Scripture tells of a diverse people reconciled to God through the blood of the cross, a people set free for the work of reconciliation." The

themes of oneness and reconciliation are central to the statement. The text further describes God's work: "Christ brings together the scattered children of God (John 11:52). The Holy Spirit breathes the freedom of the gospel into the church, where every people under heaven is represented." The introductory remarks conclude with the important claim that cultural differences matter, but God intends them as blessings.

The statement claims that Christ has broken down the dividing wall (Ephesians 2:14), and that "Christ, our peace, has put an end to the hostility of race, ethnicity, gender, and economic class." This assertion includes the confidence that "this good news sets at liberty those captive behind walls of hostility." But "because we are sinners as well as saints, we rebuild walls broken down by Christ. We fall back into enslaving patterns of injustice."

The text views the multicultural nature of society as both a given and a glimpse of the future. "We of the ELCA, with the whole Church, look forward to the time when people will come from east and west, north and south to eat in the reign of God (Luke 13:29)." Thus, our church is to welcome diversity. The statement

outlines commitments including membership diversity targets; organizational and leadership changes to promote multiculturalism; supporting ministries in African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, or other diverse settings; and advocacy to eliminate global racial or ethnic discrimination.

Although the ELCA has made some progress, the statement recognizes that the church continues to falter. “We of the ELCA too often react fearfully or grudgingly to the diversity of cultures.” Instead of delight, there has been disdain for others who are different. “A wall of hostility stands intact. Captive on one side of the wall, people with access to opportunities and institutions are largely unaware either of their own cultural biases or the worth of other cultures. On the other side of the wall, people scarred by slavery and other forms of degradation and suffering have seen their cultures ridiculed and reviled, or destroyed.”

The text argues that the ELCA has not moved beyond an assimilation approach to culture, “where the assimilated are those who adopt the values and behavior of the dominant culture.” In this way, sadly, the

church mirrors society. “Our society has melded many European ethnic groups into mainstream America, but it has included people of other cultural identities only insofar as they have taken on the values and behavior of the dominant culture.”

The statement defines and addresses racism. “Racism—a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice—is sin, a violation of God’s intention for humanity.” Such racism erects barriers, dividing and deforming both church and society. “Our mission and ministry are in a society where white people have been favored and hold unequal power to implement their prejudices—socially, politically, and economically. What has been the case is *still* the case: skin color makes a difference and white people benefit from a privileged position.”

Nevertheless, the church has a vision that breaks through the brokenness. “We are one in Christ. As the body of Christ, we are free to live out our connectedness with each other.” The statement outlines expectations it has of church leadership ranging from naming the sin of racism and leading the church in repentance to continuing to challenge the church to be in mission and ministry in a multicultural society.

What does this mean? “For some, this may mean giving up power or privilege; for others, it may mean giving up anger or prejudice.”

Finally, the text discusses how to do justice. The church’s pursuit of justice involves: 1) resisting cynicism; 2) refusing to blame victimized people for their situations; 3) assuring the participation of all people; and 4) addressing the relationship between racism and social issues such as immigration, crime, and environmental pollution, and how economic forces work against people of color in housing, medical care, education, and employment.

The church commits to involvement at all levels of public life, “globally and locally, nationally and in neighborhoods.” In its commitment to open communication, moral deliberation, and working for justice for all, the church can serve as a model.

The statement shows both resolve and repentance, and has had a significant impact on the ELCA. To see what this church was thinking in the early ’90s about race, ethnicity, and culture, *Freed in Christ* is the place to start. 🌸

Victor Thasiah is assistant director for studies in ELCA Church in Society.