



## RACISM IN THE CHURCH

*(A statement of the Seventh General Convention of The American Lutheran Church, adopted October 14, 1974, paragraphs 1-6 by action GC74.14.105 as comment and counsel to the members of the congregations of The American Lutheran Church to aid them in their decisions and actions, paragraphs 7-10 by action GC74.14.106 as the policy and practice of this church.)*

1. Racism is one of the most destructive sins in today's world. It refuses to honor God's mighty acts in creation, redemption, and sanctification. Racism simply does not trust the gospel. It builds on human pride and prejudice, abusing power for selfish advantage. Racism dishonors God, neighbor, and self. It rejects the meaning in God's becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, because in rejecting another person one rejects Jesus Christ.

2. The sin of racism expresses itself in many ways in American culture. White persons individually, and their institutions, are racist. Their attitudes and their behavior betray their racism. Perhaps their racism is harsh and blatant; perhaps it is patronizing or perfumed in euphemisms. It may be so open and exposed that no one can miss that racism; it may be so subtle and so covered over that only the victims feel its destructiveness. However it expresses itself, racism denies love for God, neighbor, and for self.

3. Pride in the presumed superiority of members of one race over those of another race provides one foundation for racism. Power exerted by the dominant group through its control of the institutions, systems, resources, and customs of that society enforces its prejudices and reinforces the structures of racism. Members of the subordinate group are assumed to have neither the full humanity, the wisdom, nor the good judgment to make decisions affecting their lives. It is assumed that important decisions must be made for them, not by them. Their

dependency grows as their freedom and responsibility are denied. Racism destroys the dignity, the integrity, and the positive self-image of human beings created in the image of the living God. Racism spawns fear, guilt, frustration, hostility, and violence.

4. America's racism is white racism. Whites feel superior to black, brown, red, or yellow persons. Whites use every channel of power to enforce and to reinforce their prejudices and to maintain their dominance over nonwhites. The American Lutheran Church is shot through with America's white racism. The image it conveys is that of a white church in a white society, a church fearful of entrusting nonwhite persons with leadership and policy-making powers, authority, and responsibility. Its congregations often refuse to continue their ministry to a community undergoing racial transition.

5. In its own self-interest The American Lutheran Church must wake up to and correct its white racism. Black, brown, red, or yellow persons may not need The American Lutheran Church. The American Lutheran Church, however, needs nonwhite persons within its membership and its leadership. It needs all people, to give public witness to the sincerity of its commitment to its mission, its Lord, and His ministry. It needs all kinds of people, to keep its members human, sensitive, open to repentance, and open to the gospel. People see in the world a struggle between "conscienceless power and powerless conscience." The American Lutheran Church can show that power and conscience can be integrated to the glory of God and the advancement of love, justice, and mercy for all human beings.

6. In the past Americans assumed the rightness of segregation—of separate but equal facilities, reservations, restrictive covenants, and limited opportunities for separate development by members of the subordinate racial groups in their own ethnic communities. Later, integration became the legal key word. In its practical effects, however, integration meant that nonwhite persons were expected to take on the values, goals, life styles, and culture of the dominant whites. This, too, was a denial of the humanity of black, brown, red, or yellow persons who took pride in their own ethnic identity and integrity. Now, in response to the gospel, the emphasis must shift. The gospel requires us to recognize and rejoice in the diversity and variety of experiences among human beings; it requires us to respect the integrity and aspirations of black, brown, red, and yellow people as persons and as members of an honored ethnic group; it requires us to foster the development of the members of each race in association with and in mutual dependence on members of other races. Therefore it behooves the church, above all institutions, to incorporate into the entire fabric of its life this variety and diversity, this respect for integrity and aspirations, this development of mutual helpfulness and mutual dependence.

7. The American Lutheran Church is aware that the time for study and for statements on racism largely has passed. The time for action is at hand. It therefore requests the general president, as the spiritual leader of this church, the symbol of its hopes and unity, and its chief executive officer, to give his continuing personal endorsement, leadership, and commitment to the elimination of white racism from The American Lutheran Church. It requests all entities of this church to address themselves in depth to the question, "How can we be and become what we are?"; redeemed children of God, able with His power to trust the gospel, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and to show our faith in "good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

8. The American Lutheran Church, as a human organization comprising sinful people, needs to repent of its complicity in the sin of white racism. It needs to see that many of its racist myths and stereotypes are part and parcel also of its sexist myths and stereotypes. White males do not relish challenges to their power and supremacy either from females or from nonwhite males. In any depth discussion of its racist attitudes and behavior The American Lutheran Church also must explore its understanding of female/male roles and relationships, dominance and submissiveness, as mandated by the 1972 General Convention action on Women and Men in Church and Society.

9. The American Lutheran Church should explore earnestly, in depth of honesty and courage, how it can make amends to its nonwhite brothers and sisters for the exploitation, injustice, and dehumanization they have suffered under its white racism. It needs to come up with something fresh, new, and creative by which it corporately and symbolically can express its repentance. It needs practical avenues for channeling the fruits of its repentance. The Father graciously offers his reconciliation; one reconciled with the Father seeks therefore to be reconciled with fellow human beings. Such reconciliation means living in mutual repentance, mutual forgiveness, often in disagreement, certainly in divergence. Such reconciliation means recognizing and accepting divergencies, differences, even disagreements. Out of mutual trust in the gospel, and the mutual commitment of changed lives, reconciliation will mobilize and channel distinctive gifts and resources into the total mission and ministry of the church.

10. In the present climate of white racism in America, The American Lutheran Church has an opportunity for leadership. It can let its feathers grow, unfetter its wings, and fly where needed to do battle with the demonic forces that perpetuate racism. Risks are great. The powers of the demonic do not repel, but rather attract the oppressors who thrive on racism. Yet, an understanding of "liberation theology" frees us for the fray. We ask, not "what will it cost" but "will it communicate the gospel?" Remembering our Lord's experience in the temple, after he read from the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:16-30), we have the answer of faith that dares the impossible possibility.

The printing and distribution of this statement by the:

Office of Research and Analysis  
The American Lutheran Church  
422 South Fifth Street  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55415

has been authorized by the General Secretary of The American Lutheran Church

Price: 4¢ per copy; 44¢ per doz.; \$3.60 per 100

Printed in U.S.A.