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Unpacking white privilege
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Study guide

Unpacking white privilege

The important work of making the church less harmful

By Robert C. Blezard

The ELCA has been working hard to help educate and inspire Lutherans to promote fairness and racial equity in our churches, our communities and our country. But it has become more apparent how much work remains to be done. With 96% of our membership Caucasian, we remain the least integrated of the nation's major Christian denominations. At the end of this guide, Shari Seifert provides some guides for the study of white privilege.

Exercise 1: White privilege and me

The term “white privilege” evokes strong feelings on both sides. For people of color, white privilege is as plain as day, undergirding our economy and woven throughout our social structure. For Caucasians, it's often hard, if not impossible, to see, especially for white families who struggle to make ends meet and do not see themselves as “privileged.”

- What does white privilege mean to you?
- How have you learned about the issue?
- What are your thoughts as you ponder and discuss white privilege?
- What are your feelings as the study group talks about white privilege?
- How have you experienced or witnessed white privilege?

Exercise 2: Unpacking white privilege

In June 2019 the ELCA Church Council issued a “Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent” (elca.org/racialjustice) that apologized for Lutherans' complicity or silence in our nation's history of slavery. The ELCA's accompanying explanation of that declaration addresses white privilege:

“Unearned privilege runs deep, and white people can't escape it. It is not based on individual attitudes or behavior. Racism is a system of structural advantage. The concept of race was built for political and economic advantage for those who are white at the expense of indigenous people and people of color.”

The explanation quotes Joyce Caldwell, who wrote about white privilege in the 2004 ELCA publication *Troubling the Waters for Healing of the Church: A Journey for White Christians from Privilege to Partnership*:

“Too often we hear in ourselves—and in others—that we are not racist. We are not privileged. After all, we may have grown up with few resources, and we have generally all worked for what we have. What we fail to see is that we have a moving platform (as in the airports) of privilege making our path easier. I grew



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up on a farm. We had few resources. I was poorer than many of the young people in my high school. I didn't see I had advantages. I worked hard in education and jobs. But then I have to look hard at the log in my own eye. I have to look at the chains of privilege and know that I am white. I benefit. I am privileged. My ancestors were able to vote; to obtain loans and build ownership; to have access to the schools and colleges of choice; to choose where to live. Those benefits accrue through the generations. Despite differences of socioeconomic class, white skin provides a benefit in and of itself."

Discuss:

- What do you think of Caldwell's witness?
- What insights did you gain about white privilege?
- How did it challenge or deepen your understanding of white privilege?
- In what ways is white privilege "unearned advantage"?
- What are some specific ways that white privilege benefits Caucasians?
- How has white privilege benefited you? How has it disadvantaged you?
- Why is it hard for Caucasians to see and understand white privilege?

Exercise 3: Wide disparities

Statistically, the lives of Caucasians and those of African descent and Latino origin are worlds apart. Here are some statistics in just four key areas:

Incarceration rates, 2016 (Source: Pew Research Center)

272 white inmates for every 100,000 white adults.
823 Latino inmates for every 100,000 Latino adults.
1,549 Black inmates for every 100,000 black adults.

Household median net worth, 2016 (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)

\$143,600 for white households.
\$21,240 for Latino households.
\$12,920 for black households.

Home ownership rates, 2016 (Source: The Urban Institute)

71% for white households.
45% for Latino households.
41% for black households

College education rates, 2016 (associate's degree or higher)

(Source: National Association for Education Statistics)
44% for white people.
29% for black people.
21% for Latino people.



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Poverty rates, 2018 (Source: Poverty USA)

- 10.1% for white people.
- 17.6 % for Latino people.
- 20.8% for Black people.

Discuss:

- What do you make of this information?
- What statistic surprises you the most? Second most? Third? Why? Explain.
- Did you expect different results among the groups? How?
- How would you explain the differences in the results?
- Is it the “fault” of Caucasians that they have the highest levels of wealth, education and home-ownership, coupled with the lowest levels of incarceration? Why or why not?
- Is it the “fault” of black people that they have the lowest levels of wealth, education and home-ownership, coupled with the highest levels of incarceration? Why or why not?
- If it’s not the “fault” of any group for their statistical standings, could it be the “fault” of our culture as a whole that gives advantages to one group and not to another? Why or why not?
- Do you agree that people of color face disadvantages in our culture just because of who they are?

If you agree:

What are those disadvantages? Make a list.

Discuss how those disadvantages figure into such areas as education, employment, income, wealth accumulation, employment, housing, social status and incarceration rates.

Do those disadvantages rely on the moral choices of specific individuals, or are they simply how our society is ordered?

If you agree that people of color face disadvantages in our culture, would you therefore agree with the converse—that white people have advantages? Why or why not?

Isn’t “white privilege” just another way of saying that our culture is structured in such a way that tends to favor white people? Explain.

If you disagree:

If people of color don’t face disadvantages in our culture, how do you explain the statistical disparity between European Americans and people of color in such areas as education, employment, income, wealth accumulation, housing, social status and incarceration rates?



Study guide: **Unpacking white privilege** *continued*

Exercise 4: Take the white privilege test

Page 14 of the January issue contains a list of 26 statements to challenge white Lutherans to understand how white privilege is borne out in their churches. Make photocopies of the page for every study group member and begin the class by having participants answer yes or no to each statement. Then discuss:

- What did you learn from the test?
- What surprised you the most? Least?
- What did the test teach you about white privilege in general?
- Based on your answers, how well do you “fit in” to your congregation?
- What do your responses say about how the congregation’s culture is oriented?
- How might someone of a different culture, race or ethnicity answer the questions?
- Many churches declare “All are welcome.” Based on your insights from the test, is that accurate (even if it’s heartfelt)?
- Based on your insights from the test, what must we do if our 96%-white denomination is to confront racism and become integrated?

Exercise 5: Responding to racism

Many white people understand the depth of structural racism in our country and the degree to which white privilege advances them—as Caldwell describes, the way an airport’s moving walkway assists pedestrians. The question remains: “What to do with that understanding?”

In the article, Shari Seifert, a white woman, declares: “It is not enough to say, ‘We are sorry.’ We must put actions behind our words. ... We must take a moral inventory of our wrongs and make reparations for the same. ... Today, as European-descent members of the ELCA, we must admit that racism is a sin against God and our neighbors and that God is calling us to do everything in our power to make things right.”

Pastor Yolonda Denson-Byers, an African-descent Lutheran, agrees: “It is not enough to feel bad or say ‘sorry.’ As an African American ELCA pastor, I am asking white folks to do the work of dismantling their privilege so that the ELCA can be a safer place for all of God’s children. ... It is our prayer that predominantly European American ELCA congregations will begin to pray—and then act—to become anti-racist Jesus followers, committed to dismantling white privilege both inside and outside our churches.”

Discuss:

- Looking at Seifert’s statement, what points do you agree with? Disagree with? Why?
- Looking at Denson-Byers’ statement, what points do you agree with? Disagree with? Why?

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- Both writers say the primary responsibility for dismantling racism and white privilege lies with white people. Why is this so? Why does that responsibility *not* lie with brothers and sisters of color?
- Is racism, as Seifert says, a “sin against God and our neighbors”? How? Why? What Scripture supports this?
- Seifert asserts: “God is calling us to do everything in our power to make things right.” How? What Scripture supports this statement? What can we do?
- Denson-Byers calls on predominantly white churches to pray and then act. Why is prayer a good starting point? What would intentional prayer about racism look like? What kind of action might prayer lead to?
- What does Denson-Byers’ phrase, “anti-racist Jesus followers” mean for you, your congregation and our denomination? Why is this a worthwhile goal? How might we achieve this?

Exercise 6: Listen to others

Some people of color say that white people neither hear them nor listen to them. As part of the anti-racism work at Calvary Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, its congregation’s Race Equity Committee created opportunities for white people to listen to the stories and observations of their brothers and sisters of color.

- Have you ever been “heard” but not “listened to”? Can you share? What did it feel like?
- Explain the difference between being “heard” and “listened to.”
- What kind of attitude does it take to really listen to someone’s story?
- Why is it important that white people listen to the stories and observations of their siblings of color in a safe, nonjudgmental and nondefensive atmosphere?
- For white members of the study group: Have you ever taken the time to really listen to a sibling of color? If so, can you share? If not, can you explain why not?
- For people of color in the study group: Have you ever felt unheard or not listened to by a white sibling? If so, can you share? What could a white sibling do to better listen?
- What opportunities does your congregation offer for Caucasians and people of color to speak and listen to one another?
- How could your congregation do more?

For further study:

The ELCA has several resources to equip Lutherans and their congregations in the important work of fighting racism and dismantling white privilege. Here are some suggested in the *Explanation of the Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent* (elca.org/racialjustice). Search for these titles at elca.org.

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- “The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries” (2013).
- “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture” (1993).
- “One Body Many Members: A Journey for Christians Across Race, Culture and Class” (2006).
- “Renewed Action Regarding Racism Toward Lutherans of African Descent,” social policy resolution CA16.05.17 (2016).
- “Troubling the Waters for Healing of the Church: A Journey for White Christians From Privilege to Partnership” (2004).

White privilege discussion guidelines for white Lutherans

- Ground yourself in your body before engaging in these discussions. It can be very easy for white folks to keep these discussions “in their head.” We need to begin to move from our heads to our hearts. Being more aware of our bodies helps us do that. One great way to ground yourself in your body is to close your eyes, take three deep breaths and just pay attention to your body.
- Be curious about your emotions that come up during these discussions. Everyone is different, but in general, white folks don’t think or talk about race as much as people of color and indigenous people do. When we begin to engage in these discussions, it can be scary for white folks as we worry about saying the right thing. As emotions begin to surface, notice them, acknowledge them and be curious about them. For example: “I’m feeling angry now—I wonder what that is about.” “I’m feeling nervous—I wonder why.”
- If you have people of color or indigenous people in your discussions, recognize that it likely takes more emotional labor for them to be involved in the conversation than it does for you.
- Don’t expect people of color or indigenous people to work through or process the emotions that come up for you. This is great work to do with other white people.
- Don’t expect people of color or indigenous people to bare their pain to you. Due to the history of racism and treatment of indigenous people in our nation and our church, church has not been a safe space for many people of color and indigenous people. Recognize that engaging in these conversations represents different levels of risk for different people.
- Remember to accept and offer abundant grace. We are all simultaneously saints and sinners. When we enter into discussions on race, we most likely will say that wrong thing. That is OK—as Maya Angelou says, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”
- Pray about doing this work and having these discussions. It is impossible for us to do that work alone! Pray that the Spirit enters your heart and guides your work.

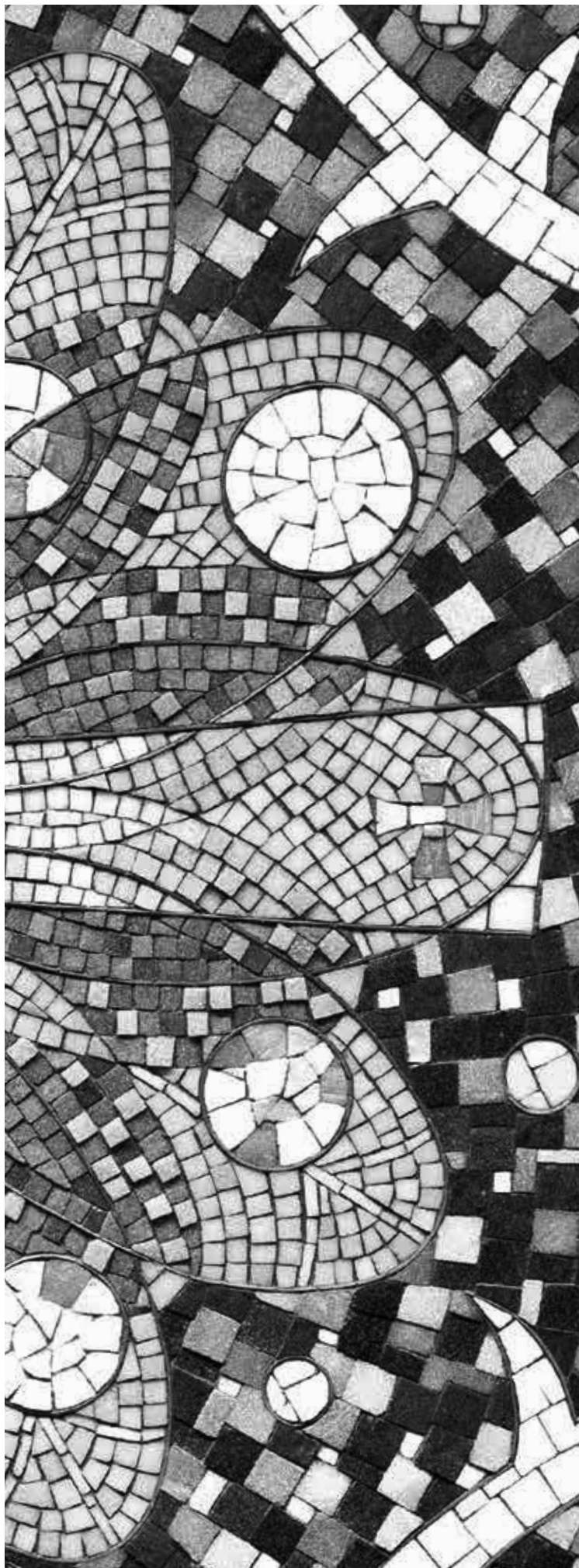
Submitted by Shari Seifert



UNPACKING WHITE PRIVILEGE

The important
work of making the
church less harmful

By Yolanda Denson-Byers and Shari Seifert



Editor's note: At its June 2019 meeting, the ELCA Church Council adopted a "Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent." At the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, leaders from the African Descent Lutheran Association took the stage with council members as well as members and staff of the working group that drafted the letter of repentance for the church's complicity in slavery and "the ELCA's perpetuation of racism." Also during the assembly, the "Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity in the ELCA" was adopted. This strategy consists of a report and recommendations on how the ELCA can exhibit and formulate goals for authentic racial and ethnic diversity.

As the ELCA works toward a more authentically diverse future, congregations have been tackling this issue head-on in their contexts. This article shares the learning, uncomfortable conversations and growth happening at Cavalry Lutheran Church in Minneapolis through the personal reflections of two women leaders—Yolanda Denson-Byers and Shari Seifert.

Shari's story

It wasn't that long ago when I wondered why my denomination is 96% white. Why, when the country is not 96% white and we are called to be the one body of Christ, is our denomination still so white?

As a European American woman, I wanted to explore the answers to these questions through deeper relationships with people of color and indigenous people in our church. As I heard their stories regarding the harm done to them inside the church, my heart broke wide open.

I was devastated as I came to a greater understanding of why so many of our siblings in Christ don't feel welcome in the ELCA. While their stories aren't mine to share, I recognize that the important work of making the church less harmful to people of color and indigenous people *is my work to do*.

It's not enough to say, "We are sorry." We must put actions behind our words. We must take a moral inventory of our wrongs and make reparations for the same. The solution to any problem is first to admit that there is one. Today, as European-descent members of the ELCA, we must admit that racism is a sin against God and our neighbors and that God is calling us to do everything in our power to make things right.

I am a member of the Race Equity Committee (REC) at Calvary Lutheran Church, Minneapolis. The REC started in 2010 as a task force. One way that we are trying to make things right is by learning about race in America and the impact of white privilege. Through this journey, Calvary has been intentional about creating a place for white people to listen and for siblings of color to speak and be heard,

facilitating an understanding of the effects of white privilege in our church.

This year, utilizing a Dismantling Racism Works article by Tema Okun titled “White Supremacy Culture” and working in partnership with a local group called Multifaith Anti-Racism, Change and Healing (MARCH), the REC has been exploring how we both resist and collude with white supremacy. Our vision is large. Through REC, Calvary seeks to see and understand the personal, systemic and institutional racism that we swim in, to become actively anti-racist Jesus followers, and to become a church that is *safer and truly welcoming* for our siblings who are indigenous or people of color.

Over the years, we have been working steadily to reach and engage more of our congregation. This programmatic year, we had more than 60 people take the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), and as a congregation, we are working on our Intercultural Development Plans (IDP) together. We have also committed ourselves to the tradition of inviting people of color and indigenous people to preach and lead adult education.

We know that we must be teachable and humble to succeed in our goals. Therefore, we were thrilled when Yolanda Denson-Byers, an ELCA pastor, agreed to preach and teach at Calvary. We had heard of her reputation as a powerful preacher who touches hearts and is also a skillful and experienced teacher.

Yolanda’s story

When Shari invited me to preach and teach at Calvary, I immediately began to pray about this important work. I contemplated what I might share with her church, knowing that they are members of the ELCA. It occurred to me, as I prayed, that I have to start this work by proving that racism and white privilege are real.

This is the place from which I always began when I was teaching the course “Race in America” at St. Cloud (Minn.) State University. It was there that I came to the startling discovery that many of my students believed that racism had been solved during the American civil rights movement of the 1960s and had nothing to do with them at all. I often spent the first third of my semester-long class convincing my 18- to 22-year-old European American students that racism was still a problem and that white privilege was real. I always began this work by introducing them to Peggy McIntosh’s article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”

This article is written by a feminist, European American female who discovered that, just as there are privileges afforded men in a patriarchal society, there are also privileges afforded European

Americans in a white supremacist one. As McIntosh attempted to understand this reality, she made a list of all the privileges that she enjoys simply because she is white in America.

Upon reflection, I wondered if it would be possible to harness this work within the ELCA, to help my European American siblings within the church understand the intrinsic privileges that come with being white and Lutheran in America. My anti-racism training at Calvary was an opportunity to explore this curiosity while at the same time developing a curriculum that could be used throughout the denomination.

It is not enough to feel

bad or to say “sorry.”

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I began my work by brainstorming all the white privileges I could think of that my European American siblings were enjoying in the church but I was not. Next, I asked a group of women of color in the ELCA to do the same exercise. Finally, after introducing McIntosh’s article at Calvary, I invited the assembled adult-education group to do the same.

The list included in this article comes from all three sources (page 14). *It is by no means exhaustive.* I know there are many people of color throughout our denomination who will add to this list. I pray that our European American siblings will not only hear the pain involved in making such a list but also commit themselves to becoming actively anti-racist and

Shari Seifert (left) and Yolanda Denson-Byers work together to explore areas of white privilege within the church.

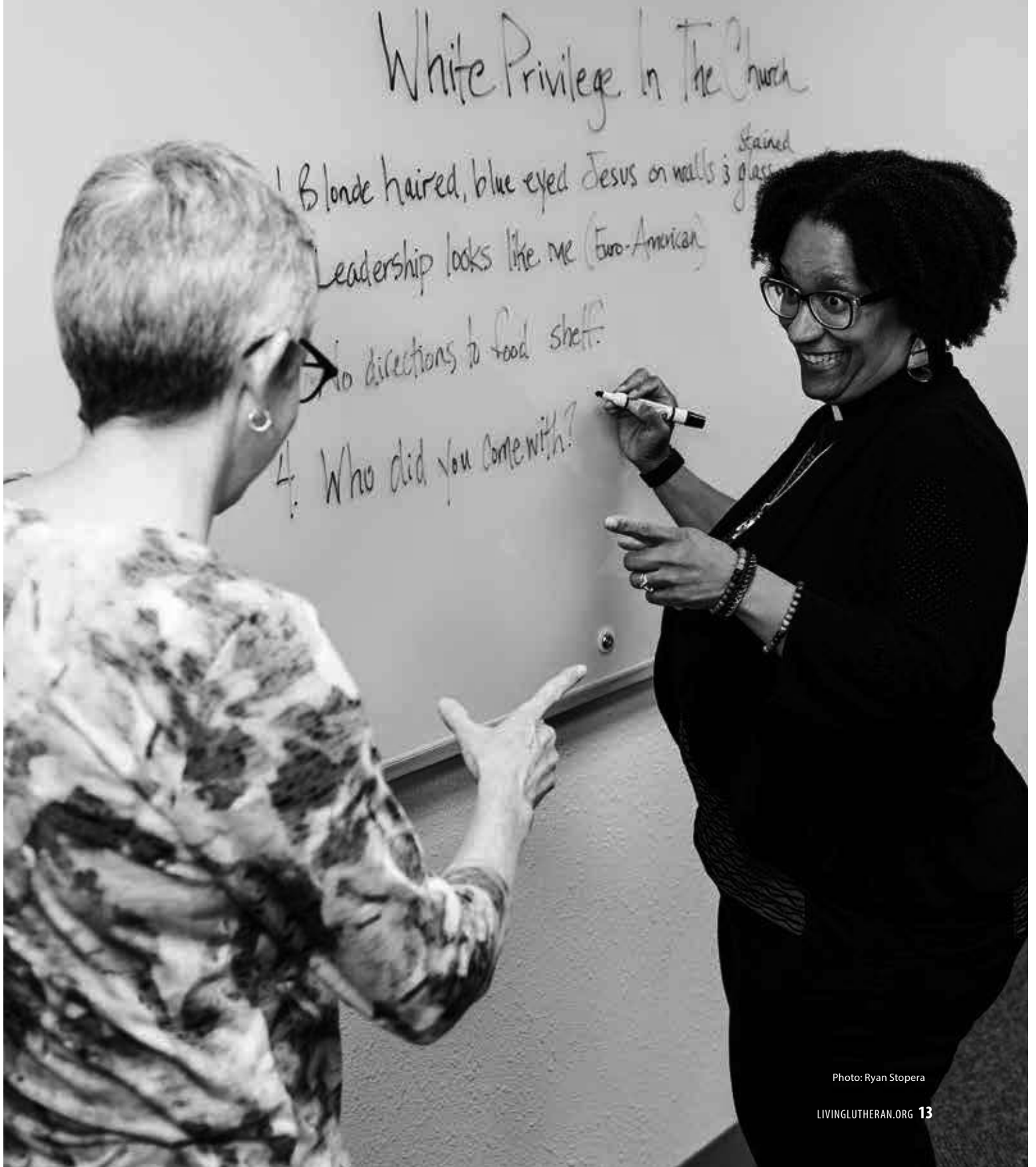


Photo: Ryan Stopera



Photo: Kristy Rolig

Black lives matter at Calvary Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Kristy Rolig (left), Scott Endo, Shari Seifert, Felecia Boone and Cynthia Sarver sport the congregational T-shirt that many members of Calvary purchased.

As a European American in the ELCA

1. I can wear whatever I want to church without judgment.
2. I am not likely to wonder why people choose to introduce or not introduce themselves to me on Sunday morning.
3. The music I hear in church will be familiar and will likely be written by European Americans.
4. When theologians are cited, they are likely to share my ethnic background.
5. On Sunday morning I can choose to stick out or blend in.
6. No one has ever told me that my church is down the street or on the north side.
7. It is not likely that people will talk over me when I am trying to share.
8. When I show up at church, no one assumes that I am there only to receive financial assistance.
9. No one questions my intellect or seeks to discern how “educated” I am.
10. People are rarely surprised by the fact that I am employed or by my choice of career.
11. If I show up at church with a person who does not share my ethnicity, I will not be asked to justify the relationship.
12. When I am asked to serve in a leadership position, I do not have to wonder if it was to fill a quota or to prove the church’s commitment to diversity.
13. When I visit a church for the first time, it is unlikely that I will be asked to participate in that congregation’s annual membership photo so that my ethnicity can be represented.
14. When I read Scripture in church, no one congratulates me on being “so articulate.”
15. I do not need a European American at my side in order to be recognized, seen and valued.
16. When I visit, people do not ask me, “Where are you from? No, where are you really from?”
17. When I am in church, people do not look at me weirdly or make me feel as if I do not belong.
18. When I enter a room, it is unlikely that people will say to me, “I don’t see color.”
19. When I visit a congregation, I can assume belonging. No one will question whether I am a “real Lutheran.”
20. When I am in an ELCA church, I can assume that I will feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.
21. In most ELCA congregations, the format and worship style will feel familiar to me.
22. When I enter the church office, I am not given directions to the food shelf unless I ask for them.
23. When I look at the leadership of my church, it is very likely that the pastor, council president and congregation council members will share my ethnicity.
24. At potlucks, I will recognize and enjoy most of the foods brought.
25. When people associate the ELCA with Scandinavian countries or make “Ole and Sven” jokes, I do not feel left out.
26. When I see a picture of Jesus—or the disciples—on the wall or in the stained glass, they are very likely to look like me.



Photo: Kristy Rolig

Endo (left), Rolig, Seifert, Sarver and Boone, members of Calvary's Race Equity Committee, spend time developing trust and working on cohesion as a team.

doing everything possible to dismantle these white privileges within the church.

It is not enough to feel bad or to say “sorry.” As an African American ELCA pastor, I am asking white folks to do the work of dismantling their privilege so the ELCA can be a safer place for all of God’s children.

Yolanda and Shari

While the white privilege list is not meant to be exhaustive, it is meant to spur deep conversation within our churches. It is our prayer that predominantly European American ELCA congregations will begin to pray—and then act—to become anti-racist Jesus followers, committed to dismantling white privilege both inside and outside our churches.

These will simply be empty words without meaningful action put behind them by European descent Lutherans in the ELCA. We invite you to join us in this liberating work that will help make this declaration more than empty promises.

May God continue to bless each of us to be the hands, feet and smile of Jesus Christ in the world! May we become missional leaders and churches, committed to creating a world, and especially

a church, where all God’s children are seen, appreciated, valued and protected.

So be it. Amen. L

About the authors

Yolanda Denson-Byers is an African-descent Lutheran living in St. Cloud, Minn., with her wife and five children. She is a pastor and chaplain who preaches and teaches anti-racism and social justice throughout the country. She holds a doctorate in congregational mission and leadership from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.; the work of dismantling white supremacy in the church gives her lots of opportunity to practice what she has learned. She recently began a new call at Faith Lutheran Church in Becker, Minn.

Shari Seifert is a European-descent Lutheran living in Minneapolis with her wife and two sons. She sells houses and dismantles white supremacy in the Lutheran church. She is on the board of the European Descent Lutheran Association for Racial Justice and the Minneapolis Area Synod anti-racism table.

For more information, visit elca.org/racialjustice. Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.