Racism and the church: A time to listen

A policeman who was called to protect his city during a riot. A pastor who brought the Lord’s Prayer into the midst of the protests. A layman whose brother was killed by police. A mother living in a neighborhood damaged by riots.

These are but a few of the voices speaking within the LCMS in the wake of George Floyd’s killing on May 25.

The voices said different things. There was pain, fear, weariness, courage, grief. No matter who spoke, there was one refrain: Christ and His forgiveness are the only way forward. We invite you to listen in to portions of these conversations.

Tyree Toney, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, Nev.
As Lutherans, we’re always pointing to Christ. And this situation is something we should be pointing to Christ in.

I have a hard time believing anybody on God’s green earth would watch the George Floyd tape and, if that’s someone they know, wouldn’t have a problem with it. If it’s your cousin, your uncle, your nephew — you wouldn’t be OK with someone responding, “Well you know, people who look like your nephew are nine times more likely to commit a crime.” So why are you OK with it now? We’re all one in Christ; we’re all brothers and sisters in the faith.

You can take any number and manipulate it to reflect any stance you want to have. But we have three examples in one month that we all agree shouldn’t have led to people’s deaths: Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd. And if someone can’t weep with those who weep in that situation, that’s something you’ve got to talk about.

So many people feel like they need to be the one with the bullhorn, leading the protest. But with our doctrine of vocation, you realize that in your day-to-day you have millions of opportunities that God laid before you. Something as simple as on Facebook, if you see people going a racist or bigoted route, you can say, “Hey, that’s not called for, that’s not right.” You might not even know there was a black person looking at it, like, “Man, how am I supposed to feel going to church knowing that these are my pew-mates? I’m supposed to feel OK with my daughter playing with his kid, knowing that when he sees my son he’s thinking, ‘There’s a 90 percent chance he’s going to be a criminal’?”

For me, this isn’t just a story, this is life. ... When I was a teenager, my brother was murdered by cops. And no charge ever came, nothing. I had a lot of hate in my heart. God softened my heart to where I can say that I hope that [the officer has] turned to Christ. I do see the healing that Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit convicting and working on you, molding you to be more Christlike, can do, because He did it to me.

One of the things that really struck me about Lutheranism is we’re not afraid to own up to our sins. So, every week, every church service, when we do Confession and Absolution — I’m not just praying for random sins, I’m saying, “Lord, forgive me for what I’ve done and what I’ve left undone.” I also had to realize that’s also happening for my neighbor ... even the cop that murdered my brother, if he had come to a Lutheran service. That aspect of not being afraid to bring your sins to the foot of the cross every single week really struck at me.

Toney is an LCMS layman who runs the YouTube channel “Wittenberg Project” and the Twitter account @Lex_Lutheran.

Rev. Dr. John A. Nunes, Village Lutheran Church, Bronxville, N.Y.

We are unable to read the mind, know the motive or the heart of former officer Derek Chauvin. So we don’t know that it was race hatred that motivated the murder of George
Floyd. What we do know is that a death resulted, and he has been charged now with murder. And we as a pro-life church take a stand that life is a precious gift and that every life has dignity, worth, value, meaning, purpose.

**Race is a scientific fiction. It’s a theological fiction** — neither Jew nor Greek nor slave nor free. In Christ we regard no one according to the flesh. The vision of heaven is one of the eschaton, is one in which these categories are abolished, finally, because they’re not essential to what it means to be human.

**But racism is a fact.**

The dividing walls between people are completely obliterated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But you know, the old Adam, though completely drowned, he’s a really good swimmer, and he keeps on coming back. So what do we do with the walls that we have? I believe that the best way to tear down a wall is brick by brick, one brick at a time. And it’s in relationships that we build, the sins we confess and the absolution we receive, the conversations that we have ... dialogue with real people across differences.

Nunes is president of Concordia College New York, Bronxville, N.Y.

**Aaron Cawthorn, Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, Indianola, Iowa**

This was one of the toughest weeks I’ve ever had as a police officer. I had to work six days in a row here in Des Moines, 15- to 18-hour days.

That first morning, over 1,000 people showed up outside of the police station to share their voice, which was great. They were telling the pain that they’ve suffered and the issues they were having. I listened and heard a lot of it.

That first night was kind of an eye-opening experience. ... We have never faced several hundred people [at once] causing that much damage and who want to actually hurt us. They started vandalizing around the city, and then throwing stuff at officers. We had to set up a line to protect the police station because they were throwing bricks, rocks and bottles. I was hit in the head with a brick; it hit my helmet.

We saw a huge difference between the people that want change and want better things for themselves and their community and the people that couldn’t care less about the community.

**It’s scary to know that you’re a target.** When you have a lot of people decide if they like you based on a title, an outfit you wear and something that you represent ... they don’t really see the true human underneath all that.
We adopted our daughter when she was 3. She’s African American. This makes me think, how, as a parent — as a loving father — am I supposed to explain this to my 5-year-old? She’s never spoken about color, but I know that someday it might matter to her. And I need to be able to explain what has happened in 2020. ... From a daddy perspective, it scares me a little bit that she could be treated differently by people.

Cawthorn is a police officer in Des Moines, Iowa.

Allison Breininger, Glory of Christ Lutheran Church, Plymouth, Minn.

We live in St. Paul, about four miles from where George Floyd was killed. We were hearing reports from neighbors of the threat of violence from outside agitators and did the things we were advised to do: leaving the lights on at night, taking the things out of the yard that could be potential things you would throw; we brought in the garbage cans, we took down the propane tank, all of the things that they said. My brother and sister-in-law in Minneapolis hosed down their house because the risk of arson is high.

What you don’t see on the news is that during the daylight, neighborhoods are coming together, and there are food drives on every corner, and there’s cleanup organizing constantly.

This moment has turned into a national moment. And so I think that this is a moment for every church to be doing the work. Just because it’s not four miles from your house doesn’t mean that it’s not happening. This is the time. It’s always been the time. But now people are asking these questions, and this is a great moment for us to say, “OK, what can we do?”

Breininger lives in St. Paul, Minn., with her husband and daughter in a neighborhood that has been affected by riots.

Kaye Wolff, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Dearborn, Mich.

I have more tears than I have words now. Tears and prayers. ... I think some of this is letting out the feelings that people have held in for so long. Now’s the time to go ahead and speak it.

I experience it. I’m married to a white German Lutheran pastor. I have gone with him to places where people didn’t know that we were husband and wife. I got treated one way and he got treated another way. And when they found out that I was there with him, and I was his wife, then they just tripped all over themselves to be kind to me.

You don’t always have to get out there and protest. I haven’t been out to the protest line yet. I’ve been at home praying, studying and preparing for the next wave. I always look at James [1:19]: “Be slow to speak.” I’m still in prayer. I’m still reading and learning, so that
when I do speak, I can educate people based on cultural experience, history and the Gospel. We have got to show mercy, we’ve got to understand, we’ve got to forgive — oh my goodness, we’ve got a lot of forgiving to do, when all of the shouting is over.

Wolff is a former vice-president of the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League (LWML) and currently serves as LWML Deaf Ministry liaison.

Rev. Robert Zagore, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Fenton, Mo.

We do have a history of racist attitudes in the LCMS, and we haven’t dealt with it appropriately. The church’s tool to address this is Word and Sacrament. And if we try to engage this issue chiefly by other means, then we’re going to neglect the greatest means that the Lord has given us to resolve this.

Christ can take two divergent people and make them one. He can bind them together. ... When our brothers and sisters in Christ are in pain, the whole Body suffers. And our response needs to be compassion and love and listening ... that we need to work this out together, and that Christ will bring peace.

Zagore is executive director of the LCMS Office of National Mission. These words are from his presentation to the LCMS Board for National Mission on June 5.

Rev. Michael Grannis, Calvary Lutheran Church, Lincoln Park, Mich.

I led several of my members in a recent march here in our community. I went out there with them to be representatives of God’s people, bringing prayer and, hopefully, a presence of peace. We printed out the Litany from our hymnal, and the Lord’s Prayer. ... People came up to us and asked us if they could have a copy and prayed along with us.

The Litany seems to speak to the moment, even before George Floyd: “To give to all peoples concord and peace; to preserve our land from discord and strife; to give our country Your protection in every time of need; to direct and defend our president and all in authority.”

Politics can’t answer these questions. Theology does. The Word of God speaks to the issue of sin, and it tells us that we have forgiveness through Christ, and we have that forgiveness to give. The people of God need to lead the way in repentance, because repentance is not what the world does.

The world will never be satisfied with what the church has to say, but the voice of God is always relevant, and the church has the commission of proclaiming God’s Word. So when the world is demanding that the church speak to something, give them God’s voice.
What’s wrong with the world is sin. It’s evil in us. And there is no set of laws that is going to get rid of this. There is no rally or march that is going to eliminate that. The only thing that can address that and bring wholeness to that is Christ. You might not like what somebody else has to say. You might think it’s the most disgusting, horrible thing you’ve ever heard. And yet Christ died for that person — that’s how much they are worth.

Grannis is pastor of Calvary Lutheran Church in Lincoln Park, Mich.


We have a police officer in our congregation. ... He’s a righteous and godly man. This man, who I would turn to if I were afraid, has been turning to me: “Pastor, I’m afraid to go to work. I’m being targeted. And if I respond and something goes wrong, it will be an international incident.”

There is fear. There is this loss of trust in institutions. People heard and tried to comply with [COVID-19 regulations]. We closed our school. We shut down in-person church services. Some of our people have lost their jobs. And then, all of a sudden, it seemed like none of it mattered. People are angry, people are confused, people are scared.

One of my parishioners recently asked, “How is this all going to end?” He meant the coronavirus, the riots in the street. ... But we know how this is going to end. It’s going to end in resurrection, and in a world where there is justice. Things may get very difficult. But the church continues because we know who Jesus is — that He is Lord, that He is coming again to judge the living and the dead, that there will be a day of resurrection and justice. So don’t be afraid. Don’t worry. We know how it ends.

Esget is pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Va., and fifth vice-president of the LCMS. His congregation, near Washington, D.C., includes police officers, journalists, politicians and military leaders.

Rev. Dr. Dien Ashley Taylor, Redeemer Lutheran Church, the Bronx, N.Y.

Things are being brought to light that have been on people’s minds and hearts for a long, long time. And we have precedents with Cain and Abel. As sin came into the world, we believed the lie that it helps us to harm or take the lives of our neighbors. ...

This moment brings us to an assessment of our real fears. If we’re afraid of riots, if we’re afraid of cultures, if we’re afraid of being a minority, if we’re afraid of becoming a minority — if we’re truly afraid of that, then, as Dr. Luther would remind us, that’s become our god. We are to fear, love and trust God above all things.
Taylor is pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in the Bronx, N.Y.; first vice-president of the LCMS Atlantic District; and a member of the LCMS Board for National Mission.

Rev. Dr. Roosevelt Gray Jr., St. Philip Lutheran Church, Detroit, Mich.

The wickedness and the brokenness are never going to go away on this side of the cross, but the mending redemptive heart of God is there to walk alongside the broken heart of humanity and remind us, each and every day, that God has not abandoned us in our brokenness.

God has not abandoned us in this. Right now, it’s hard to convince someone because they’re going to say, “Where is God? Why did God allow this to happen?” But listen. His Word is powerful, and we preach, we share it and we pray.

Gray is executive director of LCMS Black Ministry.

Stay tuned to Reporter and LCMS social media for longer versions of some of these conversations.

What can you and your church do?

Some suggestions from those interviewed.

Pray, listen, learn

Light in the Dark Belt by Rosa Young, available from Concordia Publishing House

Rosa Young video and other resources at lcms.org/thefirstrosa

Racism and the Church, report and Bible study from the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations

Statement on George Floyd from the LCMS Black Clergy Caucus at theunbrokenCORD.com

Find more resources at lcms.org/social-issues/racism

Show mercy

Collect and donate supplies to affected neighborhoods

Offer water and food to those in need

Volunteer to help restore damaged neighborhoods and businesses

Work for change
Suggestions from Rev. Dr. Roosevelt Gray Jr.

Assess community needs: spiritual, educational, physical

Work with your circuit and district

Visit lcms.org/blackministry for more information

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Discriminatory treatment of human beings on the basis of race is irrational evil and results in evil. It is folly, which can produce only anger and hatred. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” America’s original sin of legal racism, the denial of human rights based on race, has reaped the whirlwind.

God’s Word rejects racism. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). “No one is righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). All are equally created by God. All are equally accountable to God. The sins of all are equally atoned for by Christ. All are equally precious to God. Racial animosity is the result of sin and is sin in itself. Racism is not acceptable in the church. Jesus Himself bids us love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31) and did so precisely while rejecting racial preference (cf. Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25–37).
Unity in the church according to the Augsburg Confession is defined by Article VII: “For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached ... and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.” Christ and His gifts bring unity and equity in the church. Racial discrimination in or by the church is sin. Racial conflict in our nation calls every Christian to introspection. “It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17). “Righteous indignation” without self-reflection and repentance is meaningless, or worse, hypocrisy.

The one who grievously and unjustly took the sacred gift of life from George Floyd — resulting in a charge of 3rd-degree murder — will, ironically, be given the very thing he denied his victim, due process of the law. Justice must be meted out according to the law. Others may be charged.

We weep for George Floyd, for his family and loved ones because he was robbed of life. We weep for our nation. We weep for those across our nation who believe their only recourse is destruction. We weep for police officers everywhere, who carry out their honorable vocations with courage and goodwill but find their task infinitely more challenging and dangerous in the wake of the sad events in Minneapolis. We pray for the safety of all and the welfare of those who have lost property and livelihood. We pray for the police who must stand against mayhem. We support the First Amendment rights of the peaceful protestors.

We deplore injustice. We deplore destruction, robbery and doing physical harm to others. That, too, is injustice. We plead to citizens and governments of this nation for communities beset by poverty, crime and injustice. We plead for rational and unifying policies that will end injustices and address social breakdown, lack of economic access, and other factors that fuel anger, hatred and dissension.

We shall pray, but we shall do even more. We shall follow the ancient mandate of the prophet of Yahweh: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

And we shall proclaim Christ, “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2). “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die — but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7–8).

*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*
Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:1–17 ESV).

Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison
President
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Read more

• Racism and the Church — Report from LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations

• lcms.org/racism — A Christian response to racism
The Christian response to racism is centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and is shaped by clear Biblical principles.

**God is the Creator of all human beings.**
The Apostle Paul spoke of “the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth,” declaring that this God is the One who “made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth ...” (Acts 17:24, 26). He proclaims that God created out of one man all members of the human family, established their place in human history and desires that they all seek him (Acts 17:27). All of humanity owes its origin to God’s creative act.

Any and all attempts to identify certain people or groups as somehow lesser members of humankind are, therefore, a blasphemous affront to our Creator. Likewise, any affirmations of superiority or comparative worth that are based on differences in the nature of persons as human beings are to be regarded as an indictment of God’s work as Creator.

**The dignity of all human beings is given by God, not achieved or earned.**
Not even the fall of humankind into sin has erased the central Biblical affirmation, so eloquently summarized by Luther, that “God has made me and all creatures.” No human being, however distinguishable from a human standpoint, is any less fully God’s creature than any other human being since all are created in His image (Gen. 1:26-27; 9:6; cf. Acts 17:25-26).

In racist ideology, the worth or value of an individual or group is determined principally, if not solely, by genetic origin and/or biological characteristics. Race, biologically defined, becomes the basis for drawing conclusions concerning aptitudes, abilities and personality characteristics of individuals, for the purpose, in turn, of making statements about the comparative worth of a person as a human being.

Scripture teaches, however, that the value of all human beings is grounded ultimately in the value God places upon them. The value of a person is not determined by observable degrees of relative worth.

**God created all human beings to honor and serve Him alone.**
When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden, they succumbed to the temptation to be “like God” (Gen. 3:5), God’s rival. Thus, “Sin came into the world through one man ...” (Rom. 5:12). The grave consequence is that Adam’s descendants worship and serve “the creature rather than the Creator ...” (Rom. 1:25).

Racism grounds the identity and security of human life in self rather than God, in creature rather than the Creator, apart from whom a human being has no identity or security. Self-indulgent pride in “race,” therefore, must be regarded as idolatry in one of its crassest forms. It is an attempt to be “like God.”

**In Jesus Christ, God became a Man and so identified Himself fully with every member of the human family.**
Of Jesus Christ, the Apostle John wrote, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14). He was “made like his brethren in every respect” except for sin (Heb. 2:17; cf. 4:15; 5:2). The genealogies of Jesus reveal that He is bound by ties of kinship not only to Israel, but to all of humanity and that His mission embraces all of humankind (Matt. 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-28).

Any claim that there is something about the nature of another human being as such that renders that person to be of inferior value not only denies the Biblical doctrine of creation, but also calls into question what the Scriptures teach about the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

**God sent His Son Jesus Christ to be the Savior of all human beings, in whatever nation or culture they may be found.**
God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man
Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all ...” (1 Tim. 2:4-6). Again and again in Revelation, we read that God in Jesus Christ has completed His work of salvation for all kindreds, peoples, languages and nations (Rev. 5:8-9; 7:9-10; 11:9; 14:6).

Racism stands in opposition to the Gospel revealed in Scripture, according to which God has acquired the forgiveness of sins for all people by declaring for Christ’s sake that the world has been forgiven. God’s love for the world is indiscriminate and embraces people of all cultures.

**Jesus Christ has removed all barriers that stand between human beings, making peace through His cross.**

St. Paul writes, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end” (Eph. 2:13-16).

Racism in the church poisons and cripples all sincere efforts “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Physical characteristics or cultural customs are made to serve as “a dividing wall of hostility” that separates brothers and sisters in Christ—to which the only appropriate response must be, “Is Christ divided?” (1 Cor. 1:13).

**Love produced in Christians by the Holy Spirit embraces, without distinction, all people in their need.**

Foremost in the list of “the fruit of the Spirit” that is to characterize the life of those set free from the tyranny of their sinful flesh is love (Gal. 5:22; cf. 5:13-26). The “new commandment” given by Jesus to His disciples is that they love one another as He has loved them, for “by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35; cf. 1 John 2:8-11; 4:20-5:3; Phil. 2:4-5). The Savior requires His disciples to love all those whom they encounter in life. A distinguishing feature of the love that He creates by His Spirit is its non-discriminatory character. Just as “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” so now those who live by faith in God’s Son are to live in love for all people—a love made possible only through the power of God’s Spirit working through Word and Sacraments.

Through the means of grace, the Holy Spirit works within the context of all cultures to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ and to move them to worship Him.

God is not dependent on one group or the other to make effective the Gospel and the Sacraments. Rather, He enters His creation and communicates with human beings in terms that are comprehensible to them in their differences. The day of Pentecost demonstrates this dramatically. The apostles proclaimed the Word of God to people “from every nation under heaven.” Each person “heard them speaking in his own language” (Acts 2:5-6).

**Through the means of grace, God empowers Christians “to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against the soul,” including the sin of racism.**

The Gospel makes us new creatures through the Holy Spirit, enabling us to discard the sins of the unregenerate life (1 Peter 1:12, 22-23; 2:1–3; 4:1-5). Just as speaking evil of others, quarreling, malice and hatred toward others was far from the mind of Christ, so, too, the minds of those regenerated in Baptism are to be free from such evils. Likewise, the Lord’s Supper unites us to the full and complete humanity of Him who is the Creator of all and the Savior of all. We Christians must not underestimate the evil of racism in the human heart, but we are to return daily in repentance to the Christ who loves us, so that also in this matter the victory of Christ’s own grace and love may be manifested in our personal lives.

On the basis of what the Bible teaches regarding racism, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has adopted numerous resolutions over the years calling on its members (both individually and corporately) to repent of racist attitudes and actions, to combat racism both in the church and in the world and to reach out with the all-embracing Gospel of Christ Jesus to people of all races and ethnic groups (e.g., 1969 Res. 9-04; 1971 Res. 4-32 and 9-32; 1973 Res. 9-22; 1977 Res. 10-18A; 1979 Res. 4-11; 1981 Res. 8-07; 1983 Res. 1-18; 1992 Res. 1-06 and 3-03). In 1994, the Synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations prepared a report on Racism and the Church: Overcoming the Idolatry, which was distributed throughout the church and was commended by the Synod for study and conversation (1995 Res. 2-05A).

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