

A Response from the Seminary Presidents and Deans of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

On January 17th, 2015, a large group of African American presidents and deans in theological education posted “An Open Letter to Presidents and Deans of Theological Schools in the United States” on Huffington Post. The text of that letter can be found here: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alton-b-pollard-iii-phd/an-open-letter-to-preside_19_b_6492328.html?utm_hp_ref=religion.

Our colleagues’ statement was a “call for action in light of the current state of social justice” in the United States, a recognition that even as many things have changed, many things still remain the same: racial oppression and injustice still exist, only in different forms—a prison industrial complex, not plantation slavery, for example—and wearing different masks. The call was broad, and extended to civic leaders, government officials, and indeed “all freedom loving Americans,” asking us to recommit ourselves to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of a beloved community where all citizens experience liberty and justice, not just some.

Our African American sisters and brothers also issued a very particular call to theological school presidents and deans. They wrote, “We invite our colleagues—presidents, deans and leaders of all divinity and theological schools—to arise from the embers of silence and speak up and speak out as the prophet of old, ‘let justice run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream’ (Amos 5:24). We encourage you to endorse this statement by responding in your own particular context to our theological call to action with curricular programs, public forums, teach-ins, calls to your congressional leaders, writing op-ed pieces, and more.”

In the face of such a call, we, the undersigned, cannot keep silent. We want to make a public response, both acknowledging the justice of that call and also confessing our failure to live into it as we ought. As leaders of primarily white institutions, which serve primarily white churches, we recognize that all too often we are blind to our own privilege. While we confront racism in a variety of vigorous and prophetic ways in our schools, we recognize that our efforts need to be more consistent among all that we do throughout all our theological education institutions. We confess that the fear of being uncomfortable or making others uncomfortable has contributed to render some of our efforts inadequate. There are times when we are silent when we should speak out. There are times when we avert our eyes, and stop our ears.

And yet, in this Kairos moment, we find reason for hope. We are grateful for our African American colleagues who encourage us and call us back to faithful proclamation of the gospel. We are grateful for all those in our institutions and churches who have been and continue to be prophets for racial justice and freedom. And, most importantly, we are grateful for the presence of Jesus Christ in the world, who, through the power of the Holy Spirit has led us this far by faith, and continues to show us visions of the kingdom of God, empowering us to work to make those visions a reality.

Colleagues, we have heard you. Your words have not fallen on deaf ears. We recommit ourselves to the prophetic work to which you call us, and promise anew to raise our voices with yours, and make the work of racial harmony and inclusive love a work we share together in strength and joy.

In Christ,

The Rev. Dr. Ginger Barfield, Associate Dean, Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary
of Lenoir-Rhyne University

The Rev. Dr. Rick Barger, President, Trinity Lutheran Seminary

The Rev. Michael Cooper-White, D.D., President, Gettysburg Seminary

The Rev. Amy Current, Dean for Vocation, Wartburg Theological Seminary

The Rev. Dr. Diane Hymans, Acting Academic Dean, Trinity Lutheran Seminary

The Rev. Dr. Craig Koester, Academic Dean, Luther Seminary

The Rev. Dr. Kristin Johnston Largen, Interim Dean, Gettysburg Seminary

The Rev. Dr. David Lose, President, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

The Rev. Dr. Esther Menn, Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs,
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