Practices of Belonging: Mainline Protestant Culture and Notions of Lutheran Identity in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Missional ecclesiology has begun to influence the ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in recent decades. A core objective of this ecclesiological perspective is to turn the church's focus from internal affairs to ponder what God is doing in the world and how the church might be an active participant in that work.[1] Key to discerning God's call for a particular person or community is recognition of the stranger as a spiritual guide.[2] Much of the literature recommends practices that facilitate deep listening, such as congregational storytelling, one-to-one relational meetings with community members, neighborhood asset mapping, and the creation of new, public-facing ministries for building relationships.

This perspective is articulated in the ELCA's Global Mission Theology of Accompaniment and related practices encouraged by leadership in the New Start and Renewing Congregations departments of the ELCA's Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit.[3] Central to the accompaniment approach is a belief in the spiritual equality of the stranger. It emphasizes relationships that are mutual rather than hierarchical. This missional impulse recognizes the post-Christian reality that the church has been decentered in North America and that its traditional structures do not have a monopoly on God's work in the world. For some, this shift has been a liberating trend that promotes meaningful relationships with people in their communities. By reimagining the paradigm for church, ministries can be more responsive to the particular character of the places where they are located, communities that reflect the increasingly pluralistic, multicultural nature of U.S. society.

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Even as this missional perspective is taking root, another relevant discussion is happening in the denomination related to racial justice and diversity in this, the whitest denomination in the United States.[4] The lack of racial diversity has been increasingly problematized by ELCA members in recent years. A growing national discourse about race hit home on June 17, 2015, when ELCA member Dylann Roof walked into the Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and, after sitting with the congregation in study and prayer, took out a weapon and began firing. Roof shot ten people, killing nine. He later confessed that race was his primary motivation.[5]

The ELCA Church Council cited the events in Charleston as a catalyst for encouraging a more strategic vision for seeking ethnic diversity with a proposed amendment to the church constitution at the 2016 Churchwide Assembly.[6] In preparation for the Assembly,

1. Darrell L. Guder, "Missional Church: From Sending to Being Sent," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America,* ed. Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 4.

2. Inagrace T. Diettrich, "Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Spirit," in *Missional Church,* ed. Guder, 177.

3. "Accompaniment," ELCA, 2013, https://www.elca.org/Resources/Global-Mission?_ga=2.180170660.148431579.1584121028-506034723.1561830644#Accompaniment.

4. Pew Research Center, *Religious Landscape Study*, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/.

5. Jeffrey Collins, "Dylann Roof's Confession and Journal Detail Racist Beliefs," *Associated Press*, December 10, 2016, https://apnews.com/9b83ed2ecca145ffa546746dd704a092.

6. Church Council of the ELCA, "Recommendation: Amendment of Certain Continuing Resolutions," *2016 Pre-Assembly Report,* 2016, 1. https://www.elca.org/Resources/Churchwide-Assembly#2016.

> Beginning in the early Colonial Period, Lutherans were few in number, dispersed in small pockets of congregations, and only loosely affiliated with one another. Late nineteenth-century immigration from Germany and Scandinavia led to a dramatic rise in numbers of Lutherans. … Even then Lutherans remained in ethnic enclaves, isolated from mainstream American society.

ELCA Secretary William Chris Boerger recommended that the assembly strike the diversity goal that was put in place when the denomination was founded in 1988 and replace the "arbitrary [10%] goal" with a "an ongoing commitment to reflect the real diversity that exists in the places where [the ELCA] is located."[7] The assembly established a task force, which presented the subsequent 2019 Churchwide Assembly with *Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity within the ELCA*, a document that was approved by a vote of 855 to 13 without amendments.[8] The document calls upon the ELCA to pursue theological framing and equipping, healing action, structural accountability, theological education and leadership development, and partnerships that will help the church to become an authentically multiethnic, multicultural church.[9]

The multiplicity of areas identified by the strategy highlights how complex and multivalent the ELCA's approach to racial diversity must be. In this essay, I give focused attention to how racial dynamics are embedded within the missional practices of the denomination. I argue that the operative understanding of Lutheran identity in the ELCA is bound up in social and interior mechanisms (also known as performativity) that reinforce white cultural identity. Even though many individuals and congregations pursue racial justice as a matter of faith, the missional theology currently at work around the denomination will not be effective in contributing to racial equity if communities do not tend to the ways they unwittingly preserve white dominance even as they engage missional practices that are meant to be egalitarian. First, I describe some of the historical developments that led to the ELCA's identification as a mainline Protestant denomination. Second, I illustrate how white cultural norms are maintained in typical mainline Protestant settings, with special attention to the ELCA. Finally, I briefly describe performativity theory and use it as a lens to interpret how a person's relationship to ELCA environments can obscure white racialized notions of Lutheran identity that are at work for many white Lutherans. Such identification undermines the earnest efforts to form meaningful relationships across racialized lines. I conclude by suggesting that those white Lutherans who wish for the ELCA to be more racially equitable practice a simple, concrete perspective on "Lutheran" as a fluid identity category.

From ethnic church to mainline Protestant denomination

The predecessor bodies of the ELCA were not always part of mainstream religion in the United States.[10] For much of the country's history, beginning in the early Colonial Period, Lutherans were few in number, dispersed in small pockets of congregations, and only loosely affiliated with one another. Late nineteenth-century immigration from Germany and Scandinavia led to a dramatic rise in numbers of Lutherans, making them the fourth largest religious group in the country.[11] Even then Lutherans remained in ethnic enclaves, isolated from mainstream American society. They were working-class immigrants. Like other immigrant groups before and since, Lutherans looked to their congregations as places to speak their native languages and practice traditions of their homeland.

Lutheran congregations were thrust from isolation due to a combination of circumstances in the 1920s. The first challenge they faced was World War I, which saw a rise in anti-German sentiment throughout the United States. Scandinavians were also swept up in xenophobia. Lutheran churches and schools that used foreign languages were particularly suspect, suffering attacks, legal censure, and even physical violence.[12] Lutherans often responded by trying to prove their American patriotism. They publicly supported war efforts and sent chaplains to serve in the military.[13] They also accelerated the adoption of English as the primary language for worship and church business. While very few Lutheran church bodies were fully operating in English prior to the First World War, by the end of the 1920s nearly all Lutheran congregations

7. Ibid.

8. "Legislative Update," *2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly*, 3. https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Legislative_Updates_2019.pdf?_ga=2.124416010.1679937589.1571664860-158818154.1551907790.

9. *Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity*, ELCA, 2019, https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy_Toward_Authentic_Diversity.pdf?_ga=2.30937080.616242823.1579094932-1663433577.1564068949.

10. Throughout this section, I am particularly indebted to Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

11. Ibid., 202. I realize that identifying these Northern European groups may contribute to the erasure of Lutherans of other racial and ethnic identities during this period. My hope in this paper is to demonstrate how narrow identification with German and Scandinavian immigrant traditions is an insufficient and harmful category for understanding Lutheran identity.

12. Ibid., 225.

13. Ibid., 226.

had transitioned to the use of English.[14]

A related challenge that American Lutherans faced in the 1920s was intense anti-immigrant sentiment. Much of that energy was directed toward immigrants from Asia and from Southern and Eastern Europe whose numbers had risen alongside the Germans and Scandinavians. Immigrants suffered from harsh political rhetoric, violent crimes committed against them, lack of economic opportunities, and legal discrimination. In this era, anti-immigrant rhetoric was explicitly racialized.[15] Immigration from Asia, for example, was completely halted by the 1924 Immigration Act while immigration from Europe was slowed considerably. Southern and Eastern Europeans faced harsh discrimination in the first and second generation and were expected to assimilate into mainstream American society by the third.[16]

In the midst of discrimination against their fellow immigrants, newly arrived Lutherans found themselves in an awkward position. They were not yet part of the American mainstream.[17] Neither did they face the same level of vitriol that other groups endured, though David Roediger cites at least one example of a legal argument that attempted to classify Finns as a non-white race.[18] The dominant sectors of American society weren't always sure what to do with Lutheran immigrants. Mark Granquist writes:

> As Germans and Scandinavian immigrants they were foreign "others," but since they were generally Protestants, they were viewed by the dominant American Protestants as possible allies against the encroachment of the non-Protestant "others."[19]

In addition to their Protestant identity, Northern Europeans were assumed to be more intelligent; they could learn English more quickly and assimilate more easily than immigrants from other places. The Ford English school, for example, held separate English classes for German and Scandinavian immigrants for fear that they might otherwise be overwhelmed by "undesirable" European immigrants.[20] We might say that, in a time of intense suspicion of immigrants, the role of Northern Europeans became that of a "model minority"; they offered a comparison that could be lifted up to measure the "failures" of other foreigners to assimilate.[21]

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White, but not quite American. Protestants, but not White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). With rising economic status, immigrant Lutherans were within striking distance of the American Dream, but they were not there yet.[22] One wonders how this cultural identity affected the self-understanding and motivations of Lutheran communities. Should they seek to emulate other Protestant groups in order to fit in or should they maintain their theological and cultural distinctives? Should Lutherans cooperate more with one another and with other Christians in order to seek better representation? In other words, would Lutherans continue performing their role as friendly, helpful immigrants or would they strive to assimilate more decisively into WASP culture? These questions would drive conversations within and between Lutheran denominations in the decades following the 1920s, contributing to arguments, schisms, and denominational mergers.[23]

For some Lutheran groups, answers to questions about assimilation became clearer in the years immediately following World War II. Lutherans had seen growth in numbers from about five million baptized members in 1940 to about nine million in 1965.[24] They also enjoyed upward social mobility, including increased financial prosperity, moves to the suburbs, and higher levels of education. These mid-century trends were not unique to Lutherans; what was unique was a departure from the longstanding tradition of social and religious isolation among the ELCA's predecessor bodies. Lutherans who wanted to "catch up" to their fellow American Protestants were finally viewed as viable partners in social and ecumenical ventures.[25] American Lutherans were active participants in the establishment of the Lutheran World Federation, the National Council of Churches, and the World

14. Ibid., 239.

15. Many historians and crucial race theorists have worked with race theories of European immigrants. I rely on David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), Apple Books e-book edition.

16. Ibid., chapter 1.

17. Finke and Starke place Lutherans with the Catholic, Reformed, and Jewish denominations as ethnically distinct religious groups that created a distinctive subculture to parallel the dominant culture. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 2008), 155.

18. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, Chapter 3.

19. Granquist, *Lutherans in America*, 233.

20. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, Chapter 3.

21. Many scholars critique language of "model minority" for being a racialized role that causes harm to both the people in that "model minority" group and to those in other groups who are compared to it. See Eunkyong Lee Yook, *Culture Shock for Asian Americans in U.S. Academia: Breaking the Model Minority Myth* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2013).

22. Granquist, *Lutherans in America*, 237.

23. In general, when the topic of cooperation among Lutherans and with other Protestants arose, the more progressive United Lutheran Church in America argued for assimilation, the more conservative, confessional Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod maintained its distinctiveness and demanded confessional unity, and the midwestern Scandinavian denominations wavered between them. Ibid., 247.

24. Ibid., 263.

25. Ibid.

Council of Churches. They had arrived as mainline Protestant Americans.

The ELCA as white mainline habitus

The term mainline did not become a referent for religious identity until the 1960s. Originally referring to the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line, the home of some of America's wealthiest families, the term came to designate the religion of America's establishment class in the 1960s.[26] There is no official agreement or membership club that encompasses all of mainline Protestantism.[27] The designation refers to what I am labeling a "habitus," a term social scientists use to describe communal structures that teach practices and the values participants attach to those practices.[28] The mainline habitus contains a common set of traits that distinguishes them from other types of Protestants such as evangelicals and the African American denominational Christians.[29] Some recognizable components of the habitus include a shared commitment to the Bible as a source of authority that requires interpretation, openness to modern scientific and cultural norms, an influential liturgical renewal movement that affirms "traditional" forms of worship and architecture, progressive cultural and theological commitments, and a tradition of activism in social reform movements.[30]

The mainline habitus in relation to white normativity is explored in depth by Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Marcia W. Mount Shoop. Their book describes the typical habitus in the Presbyterian Church (USA) through the lens of eucharistic practice. They highlight how the PCUSA supports the power and privilege of white people while silencing people of color about their pain and trauma, even as the church explicitly advocates for liberation.[31] White Presbyterians who habituate these spaces tend to operate out of the assumption that, because they feel comfortable in their churches, people of all races must also feel welcome.

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They make these assumptions while ignoring the way behavioral norms are subtly enforced:

> Physical place, bodily behavior, dress, habituation, and the basic cultural norms of Presbyterian practice are largely those of predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle class communities…An important kind of social, racial class identity appears to be reproduced.[32]

Fulkerson and Mount Shoop's description exemplifies what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms a white habitus, "a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that *conditions* and *creates* whites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters."[33] The values and practices of the PCUSA are understood as universal rather than culturally derived and, therefore, believed to be carried out in a colorblind fashion.[34] Additionally, the denomination's history of solidarity with anti-segregation efforts renders it easy to ignore the way racism is institutionalized in the church.[35]

I am not aware of an academic analysis that explores the ELCA's white habitus to the same depth as the Presbyterian example above, but people of color within the denomination have spoken plainly about their encounters with the white habitus.

26. James Hudnut-Beumler, "Introduction," *The Future of Mainline Protestantism in America*, eds. James Hudnut-Beumler, Mark Silk and Andrew Walsh (New York: Columbia UP, 2018), 5.

27. Historian William Hutchison famously identified the seven mainline protestants, including the ELCA. William Hutchison, *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), vii.

28. Here I am relying on Pierre Bourdieu's definition of habitus: "not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principles of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes." Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 170. I also include the nuance provided in Saba Mahood's critique of Bourdieu, that the habitus is not only a place of unconscious reproduction, but a pedagogical space that contributes meaningfully to a person's self-understanding. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton UP, 2005), 136-139.

29. James Hudnut-Beumler, "Introduction," 5.

30. See David Bains, "The Beliefs and Practices of Mainline Protestants," in *The Future of Mainline Protestantism in America*.

31. Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Marcia W. Mount Shoop, *A Body Broken, A Body Betrayed: Race, Memory, and Eucharist in White-Dominant Churches* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2015), 6.

32. Ibid., 30.

33. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 121.

34. Fulkerson and Mount Shoop, *A Body Broken*, 34.

35. Ibid., 9.

For example, in a 2015 blog post, ELCA Pastor Tiffany Chaney wrote that, even though she was the daughter of a Lutheran church organist, despite having passed through Sunday school, confirmation, and leadership positions in her congregation and synod, "the toughest thing [she has] ever tried to be is both black and Lutheran."[36] Chaney attributes this challenge not to anything original to her interior self; she experiences herself as Lutheran. Rather, the struggle comes from repeated questioning of her Lutheran identity by white Lutherans. She cites the countless times she has been asked what it was like to become a Lutheran, leaving no room for the reality that she was baptized in a Lutheran church at two months old. She also shares a story of talking with someone from a Lutheran congregation and being asked if they do "Lutheran worship" at her Lutheran church. At another Lutheran congregation where she preached, a member said they were pleasantly surprised that she was "good" at preaching for a Lutheran context.[37]

Chaney's reflections are revealing and by no means singular. The #decolonizeLutheranism movement, described in further detail below, has been effective in unmasking white normative tendencies in the ELCA. Leila Ortiz also illustrates how dominant voices have deemed her own Latino/a charismatic spirituality as irrelevant and illegitimate within Lutheran tradition.[38]

One might wonder why such conspicuous exclusion of racialized minorities persists in spite of the denomination's public commitment to cultural diversity, resulting in a perplexing disjuncture between the stated theology and the lived reality of many ELCA members. In the following section, I lay out performativity as an embedded mechanism that both creates white normativity and conceals it from the consciousness of even those white ELCA members who wish to be inclusive. Because it is operative in Lutheran identity formation and practice, performativity can also be employed as a means for white people to imagine Lutheran communities that make space for racial difference.

The role of performativity in constructing fixed and fluid categories for Lutheran identity

In characterizing performativity theory, Judith Butler brings insights from postmodern philosophy about the social construction of identity (gender, race, citizenship, etc.) together with psychoanalytic theory that explores how families, communities, and societies model and reinforce normative social roles.[39] Bringing her work into conversation with section two of this essay, we might say that a white habitus is a space that provides social sanction and taboo to model and reinforce the proper performativity of social roles so that the space is most comfortable for white people.[40] This is not to say that white people are necessarily shaping the environment for their own benefit intentionally. Because the habitus is structured to maintain white identity as normative, white people may not experience themselves as having any racial identity at all within the habitus; their whiteness is either positively reinforced or receives no notice. Thus, even though identity is constructed (or constituted, in Butler's terms), performativity conceals the very mechanism that brings about notions of identity. Individuals come to believe that their racial, gendered, or, in this case, religious identities are essential expressions of who they are.[41]

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The individuals who appear in Chaney's blog post did not likely experience themselves as racist or hostile toward people of color. They were not card-carrying white supremacists. They were simply Lutherans in Lutheran spaces living out their narrative of what it means to be a "good Lutheran." To be "good" and "Lutheran" is experienced at a "gut" level (what some scholars call affect) to be incompatible with being a person of color.[42] If a person of color is Lutheran, it is desired that she would adopt the practices and mannerisms of a "typical" white Lutheran so as to avoid rocking the boat.[43] In Lutheran spaces, the bodily and emotional response to a person of color is not experienced by the white person as a racialized encounter but as an encounter between one who is Lutheran and one who is not. The white Lutheran

36. Tiffany Chaney, "Living Lutheran: My Story," *Loving God, Living Life, Laughing Lots* (blog), Nov. 7, 2015, https://revtifc.wordpress.com/2015/11/07/living-lutheran-my-story/.

37. Ibid.

38. Leila M. Ortiz, "A Latina Luthercostal Invitation Into an Ecclesial Estuary," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2016), 313.

39. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 20, no. 3 (Winter 1988), 525.

40. Ibid., 520.

41. Ibid., 528.

42. Willie Jennings has noted that, throughout modern history, people of color have been labeled difficult to convert and needing to "be brought from chaos to faith." Willie James Jennings, *Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2010), 32 and 61. While this stereotype may not be explicit in the words of Chaney's interlocutors, categorizing people of color as "not Lutheran" may represent a post-civil rights era colorblind adaptation of it.

43. Daniel Hauge identifies white comfort as "a socially constructed emotion, one which generates reflexive, intuitive practices designed to preserve white normativity." Daniel Hauge, "The Power of a Comfortable White Body: Race and Habitual Emotion," in *Religious Education* 114, no. 3 (2019), 228.

may be unaware that, in questioning the religious practices of a Lutheran person of color, he is reinforcing racial segregation for the sake of his comfort. Rather, he believes that he is protecting and preserving Lutheran tradition.

In this act, the white Lutheran is not tending to the history that led to his sense of what it means to be a Lutheran in the United States. He ignores the persecution suffered by first generation immigrants, unaware that Lutherans spent decades striving to be more like wealthier, more established white Protestants. He is also unaware of how the performance of the "good" in "good Lutheran" was once a way of appearing helpful in order to deflect existing prejudice and seek acceptance from mainstream Americans.

To ignore the ELCA's historical relationship with mainline Protestantism is also to overlook how effective mainline systems and practices can be at excluding those who do not match the habitus. I once visited a congregation that had an all-white, Anglo council even though a large number of Spanish-speaking immigrants from Latin America had joined the church. When I asked the pastor why there were no Latin Americans on the council, he seemed surprised by the question. His response indicated that, even if they could overcome the language barrier, the Latin Americans in the congregation did not possess the right kinds of skills and experience needed for council leadership. This was a congregation that was proud of its missional practices and the resulting multicultural ministry. Many of the white leaders considered Latin American church members to be their friends. They did not see how their ideal picture of a leader was shaped by white, middle-class cultural norms nor how this picture blinded them to the kinds of gifts their Latin American siblings already possessed.

Lack of attention to white racialized notions of Lutheran identity leads to a distorted implementation of missional practice.[44] The ELCA's praxis of accompaniment lifts up mutuality, inclusivity, vulnerability, empowerment, and sustainability.[45] It requires a critical rejection of any notion that "God's story is on my side, and you are on the other," compelling the practitioner to see that her story is intertwined with that of the other; both of their stories are "reconciled within God's story.[46] This kind of mutuality necessitates careful attention to asymmetrical power, but how do we tend to power differentials if we cannot see them?[47] Chaney's experiences and my encounter with the all-white council demonstrate how pernicious the performativity of Lutheran identity can be in hiding the ways white Lutherans maintain their privilege, even as these members engage in relationships *they* experience as mutual.

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It is tempting, in light of the complexity of the race problem in the ELCA, to lay out an ambitious curriculum of changes to structure and practice that might shift the way race is addressed. However, I fear that, if it has not been tried already, yet another social statement, diversity strategy, or church planting campaign will do little to affect the persistence of white hegemony that has confounded the denomination for more than three decades. Instead, I propose a modest adjustment that has the potential to reconstitute how we relate to one another across racial lines.

The proposal is this: take care when using "Lutheran" as an adjective. There seems to be significant anxiety about what it means to be a Lutheran in the present, perhaps rooted in the experience of membership decline and the cultural decentering of the church. There is an impulse to essentially define what it means to be a Lutheran in order to better articulate the place of the church in a pluralistic society. Given the way American Lutheranism has been constituted historically in relation to its immigrant past and its reproduction of mainline Protestantism, the search for the essential Lutheran seems futile.

The impulse to define a Lutheran essence also contributes to the distortion of missional practice. In seeking a definition, we create an unnecessary binary. Lutheran and non-Lutheran becomes Us and Them becomes White and non-White. The #decolonize-Lutheranism movement has already demonstrated how harmful it can be to use Northern European ethnic categories to define Lutheran identity.[48] Even seemingly "objective" categories that are invoked in discussions of Lutheran identity, such as the church's liturgical practices or its approach to confessional theology, betray

44. This "identity-performing character" of North American Christian theology is why Jennings has labeled it "diseased in form and distorted in performance." Willie James Jennings, "Disfigurations of Christian Identity: Performing Identity as Theological Method," in *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, eds. Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky (New York: Oxford UP, 2016), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2016, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190630720.001.0001, 67.

45. "Accompaniment," 7-8.

46. Ibid., 4-5.

47. Ibid., 6.

48. For a general description of the movement, see decolonizelutheranism.org. The exclusionary tendencies of Lutheran ethnic identification with Germany and Scandinavia are articulated by Jeremy Serrano, "What Does a Lutheran Look Like?" *Rev Serrano* (blog), May 3, 2016, http://jpserrano.com/2016/05/03/what-does-a-lutheran-look-like/.

historic choices ELCA Lutherans made on their journey toward inclusion in the (white) mainline.

If Lutheran identity is constituted, it can be constituted differently.[49] Additionally, the call of Jesus is a call to faithfully respond to God's grace in our practice of discipleship. Lutheran Christian identity is not an ideal we aspire to understand; it is relationship to the God who has saved us and the neighbor who is the beloved of that God. Accordingly, in an effort to disrupt the binary, we might eschew the search for a defined Lutheran identity and choose instead to allow the practice of Lutheran Christianity to be relational.[50] Taking cues from John D. Zizoulas, we might practice allowing our communion to constitute our being church together.[51] Thus, we affirm the agency of the Holy Spirit in gathering the church and assume that a person or congregation is already part of us because they are present with us. Rather than policing who is in and who is out, a non-binary approach to Lutheranism means we are already in community with one another.

Consider, once again, the bilingual congregation described above. What if Anglo members of the congregation assumed that the Latin American members embodied something intrinsic to the life of the community that would be lost without their full participation in the whole life of the church, including the council? What if they sat down with the Latin Americans and asked them how best to overcome the language barriers and to reimagine together how they might choose leaders and go about the governance of the congregation? This approach could go far beyond establishing racial quotas to actually make space for a multiplicity of cultural and ecclesial backgrounds in the Lutheran congregation.[52] While this type of intervention is slow to impact entire systems, awareness of the fluidity of Lutheran identity can immediately transform the way one individual performs his identity in relation to another in the community. Rather than responding to his gut reaction that a new idea seems "un-Lutheran," he might be invited to hold the perspective of his fellow disciple as equally legitimate and worthy of consideration by the community.

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Conclusion

When white voices talk about the slow pace of change, it is easy to assume that we do not take seriously the deadly effects of continued racism in U.S. society. Focusing on subtle changes in how we use language and its impacts on our self-understanding within a particular social environment may come across as a call for patience. [53] That is not the intention of this essay. Systemic changes are necessary for addressing institutional racism. Urgent structural impediments to equity can and should continue to be addressed in the ELCA as in other mainline Protestant denominations that hope to enable their communities to be more just for people of color. But the mainline has been structuring itself toward social justice and racial equity for decades with little impact on the persistence of white hegemony. White Lutherans who hope to be in relationship with people of color might ask: What does the absence of the very people I wish to love tell me about who I am in this space? Our hope for right relationship is in how we answer that question, not by being Lutherans "the right way," but by being Lutherans together.

49. Butler, *Performative Acts*, 522.

50. For Butler, agency is discursive rather than sovereign. This means that shifts in role performativity happen incrementally, in response to encounters with alterity that expose the inadequacies of a particular definition for implicated social identities. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 202.

51. John D. Zizoulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 21.

52. Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 273.

53. Martin Luther King Jr. famously addressed white church leaders who called for more patience and dialogue on the part of civil rights leaders. He described a long history of disappointment on the part of white, elite allies and the ongoing suffering of African Americans, insisting on immediate legal equality for black Americans. Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).