



**Lower Susquehanna Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

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Bishop

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June 3, 2020  
*The Martyrs of Uganda, died 1886*  
*John XXIII, Bishop of Rome, died 1963*

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Grace and peace be with you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Many experts were not surprised when California's 2018 wildfires incinerated nearly two million acres and more than 22,000 structures. Underlying brush and deadwood "fuel" had been building up for years, even as the state experienced record heat and drought. All it took was a spark.

Similarly, many are not entirely surprised by the violent protests following the death of George Floyd, the 46-year-old Black man who died in custody of Minneapolis police. Underlying conditions of injustice and poverty have been building up for centuries, and then came COVID-19's human and economic carnage that is disproportionately affecting people of color.

The death of George Floyd was the spark that ignited the wildfires of protest on May 25, 2020.

Together, with clear minds and open hearts, let us examine the underlying conditions of poverty, injustice and oppression that have been allowed to accumulate like deadwood and undergrowth around our feet. With understanding and prayerful resolve, let us work to transform – finally! – the laws and cultural norms to make us truly fair, equal and just for all members of society.

This week, as we witness the violent protests with horror and pray to the Prince of Peace that God's peace may reign in our cities, I invite all people of faith, and especially White people like me, to engage in deep and honest soul-searching for our church, our culture and our nation.

Addressing the protests that have embroiled our cities, Christians everywhere can condemn the violence against property and people, both protester and first responder. While most of the protesters are peaceful and not inclined to violence, a few "bad apples" seem intent on harming property and people. We decry the injuries suffered by police officers and protesters alike and pray for peace that will protect both human beings and property.

We also condemn the violence suffered by Black people in our culture where our siblings-of-color say they often are treated like second-class citizens, with often-fatal consequences. This is borne out in news reports, like the story of Chris Cooper, the Black bird-watcher whose recent encounter with a White woman in New York's Central Park went viral; or that of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man who was attacked by White men and shot while jogging in a Georgia neighborhood. And there is a long list of unarmed Black people who, like George Floyd, died during entanglements with law enforcement: Breonna Taylor, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and others.

This month Lutherans will commemorate the nine unarmed and innocent African American members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina, who were shot to death during a church Bible study on June 17, 2015. Lutherans have a special reason to mourn: the convicted shooter, white supremacist Dylann Roof, belonged to an ELCA congregation. He committed the murders out of hatred, believing he might ignite a race war.

Obviously, there is something bigger going on than the isolated actions of a few out-of-control individuals.

I call on our White church members, especially, because White people like me have been the primary beneficiaries of our nation's systems of law, economics and cultural norms. I, like many other Americans whose ancestors came from Europe, benefit from White privilege. Yes, there are certainly many disadvantaged, struggling, poor White people in our nation, but proportionally there are many more disadvantaged people of color. The statistics bear this out:

- **Median net worth:** White households have a median net worth of \$143,600, compared to \$21,140 for Latino households and \$12,920 for African American households. (Source: [U.S. Census Bureau](#))
- **Home ownership rates:** 71 percent for White households; 45 percent for Latino households; and 41 percent for African American households. (Source: [The Urban Institute](#))
- **College education rates:** 44 percent for White people; 29 percent for Black people; 21 percent for Latino people. (Source: [National Association for Education Statistics](#))
- **Poverty rates:** 10.1 percent for White people; 17.6 percent for Latino people; 20.8 percent for Black people. (Source: [Poverty USA](#))

Consider in this overly simplistic analysis how interconnected are the four statistics cited. How much money a family has determines their choice of communities to live in, and poorer families can afford only poorer communities. The wealth of a community determines the quality of the school system that educates its children. The quality of K-12 education (along with family income) is a key factor in whether and where a child goes to college. Higher education influences the kinds of jobs and income that a person makes. Coming full-circle, income affects where people can live.

Economics is just one sphere where systemic racism comes into play. Criminal justice has its own complicated interconnections between poverty, law-enforcement priorities, criminal codes and courthouse justice. (But even here economics plays an important role: wealthy people charged with crimes can afford to mount sophisticated, competent and *expensive* legal defenses. Poor defendants cannot.) And the incarceration rates are horribly askew: White prison inmates number 297 per 100,000 White adults; Latino inmates, 823 inmates per 100,000 Latino adults; and for African Americans, 1,549 inmates per 100,000 Black adults. (Source: [Pew Research Center](#))

These statistics bear witness to systemic racism – racism that is not linked to discrete prejudicial acts of people who hold animus toward others because of race, ethnicity or some other factor, but rather the cumulative effect of the attitudes and actions of a whole culture. It's the system itself that is racist. The current system oppresses people of color which allows for White privilege to exist. The statistics show that White privilege is real; that people of European descent are advantaged. And while the COVID-19 virus did not invent systemic racism, the pandemic did reveal its damaging reality.

Proportionately, coronavirus has infected and killed more people of color than White people, according to many health experts, including Johns Hopkins Medicine. A [Hopkins report](#) cites a number of factors connected to systemic racism: people of color are more likely to live in crowded conditions (so social distancing is harder); are more likely to be employed in lower-paying “essential” jobs (so they can't work from home); are less likely to have access to health care (due to

lack of insurance or underinsurance); yet are more likely to have chronic health conditions that make them susceptible to the worst effects of coronavirus (related to lack of health care).

This month, as we witness the terrible wildfires of protests that are burning across our country, touched off by the death of George Floyd, let's prayerfully do the hard work of looking at the undergrowth and deadwood of systemic racism that has been accumulating at our feet.

I call on Lutherans to engage in learning, reflection and prayer, individually and in their congregations, about the history, the causes and (importantly) the effects of systemic racism in our country. Many excellent resources can be found both on the [ELCA website](#) and on our synod's [Toward Racial Justice Task Force](#) webpage.

We can make our prayer and study part of this month's remembrance of the fifth anniversary of the shooting at Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The ELCA is observing June 17 as the "Emanuel Nine Commemoration and Day of Repentance," after the nine African Americans martyred there. (The ELCA has [gathered resources](#) for that day. Also, look for online observances in prayer and worship by both me and Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton.)

Jesus calls on us to be salt of the earth and light to the world, and he teaches that peacemakers will be called the children of God. With God's help, let's live up to our calling by working to recognize and call out systemic racism, and prayerfully through the power of education, persuasion, and legislation, eliminate it once and for all.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James S. Dunlop". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

† James S. Dunlop, bishop  
Lower Susquehanna Synod ELCA