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A Letter of Hope to the Concordia Seminary Community

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Shortly after the death of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., these remarkably blunt words from Lutheran pastor and civil rights leader, William H. Griffin, were released by Concordia Publishing House: “Unless the church faces up to the racism in its own midst, the witness of the church against the racism outside the church will go unheeded.”¹

Fifteen years after Griffin’s words, I composed a faint echo of his wisdom. Upon the completion in 1985 of my undergraduate, pre-seminary training at Concordia College, Ann Arbor, in pain I sent a blistering letter to the president, David Schmiel. Though I was privileged to receive what I yet consider a world-class theological, philosophical, and liberal arts education, the incapacity of many in the campus community to “face up to the racism in its own midst,” led me, once my degree was in hand (smile!), to vent. Likely fueled by no small amount of youthful bump-tiousness, I protested that my Lutheran college experience was limited by “institutional racism and monocultural myopia.”

Irrespective of the opinions that today’s seminarians hold about Black Lives Matter or the posture of athletes during the national anthem preceding sporting events in the United States, King’s solution to the problem of race aligns with our Lutheran theological approach. Martin King, like Martin Luther, “was a gradualist and reformist, rather than a revolutionary, when it came to matters of injustice.”²

King’s approach was not predicated on racial essentialism or the identity politics that plague our nation. David Brooks, for example, has editorialized compellingly about how identity-based virtuosity is destroying national unity.³ Every side primarily defines itself as innocent based on it being oppressed by an oppressor—whether white males or the progressive elite or the LGBTQ community or pick your motif du jour. This is the logical outcome of conversations about race that begin (in my estimate, falsely) with the ontology of one group’s particularity rather than a theology of the Creator’s imprint establishing our common anthropology. King was a proponent of this latter idea, the *imago Dei*. In our time, primary perpetrators of this divisiveness are progressive academic communities which when confronted

with other alternate perspectives label them dismissively or refuse outright to permit them to speak. But let us not overlook also conservative faith traditions. These often require outsiders to convert to cultural forms (social values, liturgical styles, ways of speaking, political alignments) as an indirectly articulated prerequisite to join their community. Christianity has a track record of colonialism. The putative rise of white male victimhood is often used to reinforce this strategy. As a result, the pure doctrine on which The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) insists, for example, is becoming soiled by the subtle, non-essential, social accoutrements we vainly attach to it as core to our identity.

There is no question that the LCMS has formally condemned the sin of degrading other humans based on race. We have a document to prove it published by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations.⁴ We, sadly, do not have much tangible evidence—beyond these biblically ground and founded words—that we practice what we preach. For example, consider your own social network. Social networks mean much more than social *media* networks but refer to the whole world of those with whom we ordinarily interact or to whom we consider ourselves connected. It's larger than friendships—which tend to be few and rare—though certainly social networks are often the embryo of friendships. Perhaps we need to consider ways that the church, *coram hominibus*, is a social network that can be expanded with intentionality through kindness and hospitality towards others, through actions which implicitly verify our words rather than beginning with explicit verbal, theological witness. I've never thought theology constitutes the prime attraction to Lutheranism anyhow, though it likely solidifies one's membership. *The Huffington Post* recently reported that "three-quarters of whites have entirely white social networks without any minority presence."⁵ Think about the ways in which this contributes to confirmation bias in the church; augmenting our differing ways of seeing the world, of defining the problems of others, of rationalizing our own innocence, of viewing with conviction ourselves as right! And when you're right, why should you change?

There will be no change for an issue of the magnitude of racism—one deeply engrained and tribally reinforced in human behavior—without a radical investment in witnessing to the point of the Greek origin of this word, *martyria*—a notion which humans of the United States are particularly disinclined. We even have religious groups that specialize in health, wealth, happiness, and prosperity—a problem-free philosophy of *hakuna matata* religiosity. "We don't buy into that garbage," I hear some of us defy, "we trust the Spirit to lead us and build the church." Of course, the word of the Lord grows the church! But, to continue the image, it helps if that seed is fertilized. Tertullian was right: "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."⁶ What does fertilization look like? Perhaps sacrificing what is non-essential to the Gospel for the sake of our neighbors? Perhaps surrendering some of our privilege to open doors for minorities who are loaded with potential and committed to hard work

but there is no access to opportunity? All people need to be regarded as more than recipients of charity or objects of pity which ultimately dehumanizes them and compromises their dignity. But motivated by God's timeless love, we reach out. As the poet says, with love:

Love,
made seasonless, or, from the high privilege of their birth,
something brighter than pity for the wingless ones
below them who shared dark holes in windows and in houses.⁷

Perhaps, in a world that reduces other humans to little more than "wingless" objects of personal pleasure or stepping stones to profit, we deploy a muscular stewardship, we use our power to lift others up and to advocate for those who are unjustly treated? Consider joining those who protest racism? Be prepared to sacrifice even to the point of your own bloodshed? If the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s taught us anything it was: 1) that an appeal to a higher source like the US Constitution and the Bible (rather than, say, an ethnic or racial category, i.e. blackness) can bring social change, and 2) that the blood of the witnesses engaged in non-violent resistance is the seed of racial reconciliation.

We are blessed by the sainted Gudina Tumsa (1929–1979) as a witness. His is a name that should be kept in remembrance among us so that we can emulate his good works. In the 1970s Tumsa served as the general secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus. Refusing to bow down to the draconian political demands of the Marxist revolutionary government seeking to silence the church, he was arrested. Refusing to submit or recant, he was tortured. Refusing to flee from Ethiopia while he had a chance (like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, a generation before Tumsa, remained in Nazi Germany) he was re-arrested and viciously murdered. Each refusal was predicated on his doctrinal conviction: that God's justice in the world and God's justifying act in Christ are inextricably linked. He wrote: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God's power to save everyone who believes it. It is the power that saves from eternal damnation, from economic exploitation, and from political oppression... It is the only voice telling about a loving Father who gave His Son as a ransom for many. It tells about the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body. It is the Good News to sinful humanity... It is too powerful to be compromised by any social or political system."⁸

Tumsa was a student of King who predicated his approach to race on an affirmation derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition: that an essential dignity was bestowed by God to all people. For Christians that is only augmented by an indivisible baptismal identity. We are a new creation. We are a new nation. Dividing walls are demolished. In world of bitter and violent divisions, where people struggle to deal with differences, Christ has made Concordia Seminary a community of learn-

ing where mutual respect flourishes. If so-called “minorities”—who constitute both the majority of global Lutherans and the vast majority of this planet’s citizens—feel safer, more welcomed and more respected in what we label “secular society” than inside of US faith-based communities, we, 1) at least, have an image problem, 2) at worst, have a racism problem, and, 3) at best, have a Lenten opportunity to engage in self-reflection and renewal. It’s a non-negotiable element of our theology. I believe students from this Seminary will lead the church and the nation and planet towards a way of righteousness with respect to race.

Depending on the criteria being used,⁹ there are more different kinds of people in the United States of America, living, loving, working, playing, and praying in relative proximity to one another and with relative peace between groups than in any other country, perhaps ever in the history of the planet. Ironically, it is this very diversity—magnified by the global, public prominence of the United States and impelled by the exceptional promise of *e pluribus unum*—that serves to make more obvious in the United States the pockets of resistance breaking faith with our national experiment; this dissonance is especially glaring among those holding to false religions of racism or religious groups which reject racism but, like the LCMS, have been categorically unsuccessful in evangelism among non-white, non-English-speaking groups.¹⁰ The higher the bar is set, the more blatant is the missing of the mark. The louder we let freedom ring and opportunity peal, the more contrastively the discordant notes of exclusion or oppression jangle. The more we confess theological orthodoxy, the more we should expect a corresponding orthopraxy. The more we bask in Christ’s light, the more we let our lights shine in the culture.

Western civilization is both remarkably resilient and uniquely pluralistic. The church of Jesus Christ, by comparison, exceeds secular levels of resilience (existing without end) and pluralism (consisting of all people across time and place). The durability of the LCMS is another question, in part due to what Griffin suggests. As the demography—especially child-bearing rates—of the United States becomes a majority of “minorities,” our capacity to evangelize externally is inversely related to our tolerance for the cancer of racism internally. This racism is not ordinarily an obscenely overt, roaring racism. We’d quickly denounce that! It is furtive and fused. It requires a renewed consideration of hamartiology. This next generation of clergy must take seriously the cataclysmic character of sin, that it leaves no person, tradition, or institution untouched; and that our theological reflection, while committed to the unassailable truth of God’s Word, is also committed to using reason to engage in critical and self-critical reflection. In terms of the ongoing reformation of the church, we must examine our traditions to ensure that they don’t fall into the category that our reformers condemned as “useless and contrary to the Gospel.”¹¹ To complicate things more, I encourage us to involve others from outside of our tradition in that dialogue. If we believe it, teach it, and confess it, we should be able to defend it. And if

our arguments don't hold up, we might want to consider changing them.

So, the penultimate word goes to the Lutheran Confessions: "Therefore, we believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such practices ["ceremonies"] according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church."¹² And the final word to a father of the LCMS, one of your former faculty members, Arthur Carl Piepkorn: "The Christ who in His lifetime manifested Himself as the sworn enemy of injustice, of disease, of prejudice, of discrimination, and of exploitation is calling us to an imitation of Himself in these areas also."¹³

Endnotes

- 1 William H. Griffin, "God's Call to the City," *The Concordia Pulpit for 1970* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969), 343.
- 2 Gary Simpson, "Lutheran" in *The Encyclopedia of Global Justice*: 668.
- 3 David Brooks, "The Retreat to Tribalism," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2018.
- 4 "Racism and the Church," Commission on Theology and Church Relations, February 1994, <https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcms&cid=1052>.
- 5 For the original report, see "Race, Religion, and Political Affiliation of Americans' Core Social Networks" PRRI, August 3, 2016, <https://www.prr.org/research/poll-race-religion-politics-americans-social-networks>.
- 6 Apologeticus, Chapter 50.
- 7 Derek Walcott, "Season of Phantasmal Peace," Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57412/the-season-of-phantasmal-peace>.
- 8 See Øyvind M. Eide, *Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2000), 280.
- 9 Human diversity is a fluid and dynamic concept—without a single or simple definition. It is related to how humans understand, interpret, accept, and respect differences and alterity; these include, but are not limited to, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical ability, political beliefs, religious beliefs, and ideology.
- 10 Lutherans remain among North America's leaders in this category of homogeneity—exceeding, astonishingly, even Mormons.
- 11 See Augsburg Confession XV in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 49.
- 12 Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration X.9 in Kolb and Wengert, 637.
- 13 Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "The One Eucharist for the One World" in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, February 1972: 101.