

Introduction

For many decades, the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) and the [African Methodist Episcopal Church](#) have been ecumenical partners through coalitions such as the [National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA](#) (NCC). In the 1990s, our two churches entered into theological dialogue, seeking full communion, and co-published a congregational resource, [“Understanding One Another.”](#)

Our churches have also engaged in various forms of cooperation and public witness, together and with other ecumenical partners. One example is the presiding bishop’s sign-on and ELCA participation in Black Lives Matter Sunday, organized in December 2014 by the AME Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church after a grand jury chose not to indict a police officer in the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager, in Ferguson, Mo. The ELCA has participated in the cross-racial dialogue of the [Conference of National Black Churches](#) since 2015 and in the NCC’s [A.C.T. to End Racism](#) initiative since 2018.

While the Office of the Presiding Bishop attends to church-to-church relations nationally, vital regional and local relationships have been cultivated across the ELCA by bishops, rostered ministers and lay leaders, with key leadership from Lutherans of African descent. An inspiring example of this is the partnership, born out of cooperation between [Lutheran and AME congregations in Pittsburgh](#), to reclaim land that the AME Church had been forced to surrender decades ago. We continue to seek ways to deepen and expand our partnership across various ministry contexts and communities as part of our ecumenical commitments and churchwide resolutions. Individuals and congregations are encouraged to reach out to their AME neighbors to build relationships and engage in cooperative ministries and actions for justice.

The Emanuel 9

On June 17, 2015, nine members of Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. — Clementa C. Pinckney, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Lee Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton and Myra Thompson — were murdered by Dylann Roof as they gathered for Bible study and prayer. Roof, a self-professed white supremacist, had been raised in an ELCA congregation. Two of the martyrs, pastors Pinckney and Simmons, were graduates of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary.

Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton issued a [public statement](#), as did the [Lutheran World Federation](#). Eaton also sent a letter to the Rev. John Bryant, then senior bishop of the AME, and the AME’s Council of Bishops, expressing the ELCA’s profound condolences and commitments to partnership. Graciously, the senior bishop invited Presiding Bishop Eaton to participate in the procession at the funeral of Rev. Pickney, where President Barack Obama delivered the eulogy.

In July 2015, the AME’s Council of Bishops issued a statement and an ecumenical call to action. The first part of that call was the AME Church’s invitation to ecumenical partners to join it in declaring Sunday, Sept. 6, a “Day of Confession, Repentance, Prayer, and Commitment to End Racism.” Eaton pledged the ELCA’s participation, which was supported by the ELCA Conference of Bishops and many rostered ministers. The second part of that call was “Liberty and Justice for All,” a series of events organized by the Black Methodist Coalition in Washington, D.C., in September 2015. These events included a press conference at the National Press Club, a briefing at the White House with senior administration officials and an ecumenical prayer service. Kathryn Lohre, ELCA executive for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations and, at that time, the immediate past president of the NCC, spoke at the press conference and participated in the prayer service.

Since December 2015, the ELCA has co-sponsored the cross-racial dialogue convened by the annual consultation of the Conference of National Black Churches (CNBC). The CNBC is an umbrella organization for the eight largest Historic Black Churches in the United States. The annual consultation addresses ecclesial and policy issues that impact communities of African descent. The ELCA delegation, led by Eaton, has included leadership from the African Descent Lutheran Association.

In 2016, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted the resolution “Deepening Relationships with Historic Black Churches,” which bolstered this work across the church and called for greater coordination. That November, the NCC governing board met in Charleston. Lohre and Herman Yoos, bishop of the ELCA’s South Carolina Synod, participated in the ecumenical service of remembrance at Mother Emanuel.

In January 2017, Bishop John White, then president of the AME Council of Bishops, was received as a special guest by the ELCA Bishops’ Academy meeting in Charleston. Bishop White provided leadership during Epiphany worship at St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church and joined the ELCA bishops in their pilgrimage to Mother Emanuel. He also met with Yoos, Lohre, Presiding Bishop Eaton and Bishop Donald Kreiss, chair of the ELCA Conference of Bishops’ Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations Committee, to explore renewed church-to-church relations. Since then, several meetings and conversations have taken place to build on the theological dialogue of the 1990s and 2000s toward new models of diapraxis, or dialogue in action. As part of this effort, representatives considered possibilities for the churches coming together within wider ecumenical initiatives such as the NCC’s [A.C.T. to End Racism](#) initiative, launched in 2018.

In 2019, in the context of the ELCA’s “[Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent](#)” at the Churchwide Assembly, the voting members adopted two related resolutions. The first called for the ELCA to recognize June 17 as “[Emanuel 9 Commemoration and Day of Repentance](#),” to develop worship resources for observing this, and to deepen its conversations with the AME Church on matters of racism and white supremacy. (You can find worship resources developed in response to this resolution at [Commemoration of the Emanuel Nine - June 17](#).) The second resolution was “[Condemnation of White Supremacy and Racist Rhetoric](#).” Responding to these actions, the senior Episcopal leadership of the AME Church wrote to Bishop Eaton, noting that “Martin Luther was the ‘Great Reformer.’ Richard Allen started the AME Church to reform the racially divided American Christianity he experienced in his lifetime. It is appropriate that the Churches birthed by these two persons who sought more authentic and

true expressions of Christianity to engage in conversations that will lead to 21st Century reform, justice, and reconciliation.” Bishop Eaton replied, offering the ELCA’s firm commitment.

In October 2019, Eaton preached at the opening service of the NCC’s annual Christian Unity Gathering, held amid the ecumenical commemoration of the quadricentennial of the transatlantic slave trade. At this gathering, she convened the heads of communion of the predominantly white churches to begin their shared work of combating white supremacy. She deputized Lohre and Judith Roberts, then director for racial justice in the Office of the Presiding Bishop, to lead an ecumenical task force. In early 2020, this task force worked to develop a common definition of white supremacy, which was adopted as part of Eaton’s report to the NCC governing board in May 2020. This work was also taken up by the NCC’s Faith and Order Table, which published the 2024 book *Confronting Racism and White Supremacy in the US: Twenty-First-Century Theological Perspectives*. The Rev. Carmelo Santos, director for theological diversity and ecumenical and inter-religious engagement in the Office of the Presiding Bishop, contributed a chapter, “Lutheran Theological Resources to Confront White Supremacy.”

In 2020, the fifth anniversary of the Emanuel 9’s martyrdom fell during the COVID-19 pandemic. An [online worship service](#), which included AME senior leadership, was produced and shared across the ELCA. In 2022, Bishop Eaton was invited to participate in a [daylong series of online events](#) to commemorate the seventh anniversary, hosted by the [Emanuel Nine Memorial](#). She joined with AME and other church leaders in a [Bible study event](#) that kicked off “What Kind of Soil Are We?,” a yearlong, nationwide study involving ELCA and AME congregations. The title comes from Mark 4:1-20, the text the Emanuel 9 were studying when they were murdered.

In 2022, Vashti McKenzie, the first woman elected bishop of the AME Church, was appointed as interim president and general secretary of the NCC and brought greetings to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. The following year, she was elected president and general secretary of the NCC as Bishop Eaton became chair of its governing board. The two leaders have strengthened the partnership ecumenically, and also between the churches. As a result, Bishop McKenzie [preached at the 2023 ELCA Rostered Ministers Gathering](#) and will address the Churchwide Assembly in July 2025.

The churchwide organization encourages all expressions of the ELCA to strengthen this partnership through personal friendships, congregational and community partnerships, and/or cooperation between our bishops. One inspiring example is the [partnership between Lutheran and AME congregations in Pittsburgh](#) to reclaim land that the AME Church was forced to surrender decades ago. We continue to seek ways to deepen and expand our partnership across various ministry contexts and communities as a crucial way of living out our ecumenical commitments to the AME Church. We encourage individuals and congregations to reach out to their AME neighbors, to build relationships, to engage in cooperative ministries and actions seeking justice, and to share their stories with us.

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