Introduction to Conversations on Race

During the election for Bishop at our 2013 Synod Assembly, the candidates were asked, “what social justice issue are you most passionate about?” I responded by speaking about racism – both personal and institutional or systemic racism that negatively affects our ability to be the whole people of God. Some of you thanked me for naming the reality of racism. Some of you hoped I wouldn’t mention it again.

Since that conversation 2 years ago, we have continued to witness the destructive effects of institutional racism across our country. In cities and towns, on college campuses, in high schools, at family dinner tables, in our congregations, and in the halls of government, we have seen how race, power and privilege can tear apart our human community.

This church, the ELCA, began with the goal that at least 10% of our membership would be made up of people of color – 25 years later, we have failed in that goal. In NJ, our “home rule” style of civil government perpetuates segregation – economic and racial. Our congregations, while becoming slightly more racially diverse, have a hard time bridging economic divides to become truly inclusive of the whole people of our state. Racial and ethnic tensions, fear of change and the unknown, and institutional structures that benefit only certain segments of our society all contribute to our failure to be the church that we hope to be.

I believe that we are called to speak out against the sin of racism, to work for reconciliation, to break down the systemic barriers that keep some of us in positions of power while keeping others out. As people of God, we are called to name the sin that infects us – whether we are the privileged or the one holding resentments against the privileged, to ask for forgiveness, to give voice to the hope that comes from being baptized sisters and brothers, and to work for justice and peace.

In just a few minutes, we will gather in smaller groups to participate in discussions around race and racism. We will be grounded in our conversation by Scripture and prayer. My hope is that as we model how to begin a conversation on this emotionally charged topic, you will take these resources back to your congregations, your families, your own circles of influence and continue not only to talk together about race in our society, but also to make changes in your own lives that may result in a more just and peaceful world.

Just a word about the way these conversations will happen. You will note on your nametag a room assignment – when dismissed, please go directly to the room to which you are assigned so we can have maximum time for conversation. Once there, a facilitator will guide your group through a Responsive Bible Study in which you will be asked to listen, reflect and share with each other.

We will use “mutual invitation” as a way to insure that each person around a table has opportunity to share and that no one person dominates the conversation. Mutual invitation is an intentional process that invites each participant by name to respond to a question or share a comment. So for example, if I am the leader at my table, I will say….Mary, I invite you to share your response. Mary can then either share or say, I will pass. Then Mary says, Scott, I invite you to share your response… and so on. Inviting each other by name, helps to hold each person in the group accountable to listening as well as assuring that no one hijacks the conversation.

I trust that this will not be the only conversation we will have on this topic. We will gather responses from your small groups in order to plan the next steps for how we, as synod, will move forward in addressing and eradicating the sin of racism.

Let us pray: Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may move every human heart; that the barriers dividing us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; and that, with our divisions healed, we might live in justice and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Please move to your small groups.