

**What We Have Seen, Felt and Heard:**  
**Called To the Church: A Gathering of ELCA African Descent Pastors In White**  
**Congregations**

On October 23-24, 2008, the African Descent Outreach and Multicultural Ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America hosted the gathering, *Called To The Church: A Gathering of ELCA African Descent Pastors in White Congregations* at the Lutheran Center, Chicago, IL.

The gathering attracted over 50 ELCA pastors, students from Lutheran Theological Seminary in Chicago and Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg and Bishop Callon W. Holloway Jr. of the Southern Ohio Synod.

The need for the assembly was sensed by Dr. Everett Flanigan, Director of African Descent Outreach and Leadership, ELCA and Rev. Dr. Julius Carroll, former Director of African Descent Ministries for the Multicultural Ministries unit, ELCA.

During the opening worship for the gathering, Flanigan reflected on how the gathering confirmed that the pastors in attendance needed fellowship, networking and affirmation and that they are often sent to minister to white congregations without necessary support systems.

“What took you so long to come? We’ve been looking forward to your visit so we can hear your stories, to learn of your joys and to help nurse your pains and to celebrate with you. We know what it’s like to be the first one; the only one – the pioneer. This consultation was designed to be a gathering of sharing, of lifting up and of learning. Our black pastors serving in white congregations, called to the whole Church shows us where God is leading the ELCA” he said.

“In my capacity as Director for African Descent Ministries in the Multicultural Ministries Program Unit, I was struck with the reality of 34 Black pastors serving predominately White congregants! It has been only in recent memory that so many African Descent pastors were serving in this way,” said Carroll.

“As I had conversation with these pastors, I asked them what their needs were in order to be about effective ministry. Their responses clustered around: isolation within the African Descent ministerium and lack of opportunities to garner specific skill sets in order to effectively accomplish multi-cultural/racial ministry.

“The nurturing of ethnic-specific rostered leaders is a stated goal of the Multicultural Ministries’ Program Unit. I reviewed the names of the 34 pastors serving White congregations and strove to have a balance of years in the ordained ministry; gender and regional representation, “Carroll continued.

A planning team evolved from the names Carroll reviewed: Rev. Andrea Walker, St. John's Lutheran Church, Summit, NJ; Rev. Beverly Conway, Redeemer Lutheran Church, South Holland, IL and Rev. Michael Cobbler, Hilltop Lutheran Church of the Ascension, South Bend, IN. After the initial planning stages, Carroll accepted a position as Associate Professor of Contextual Education at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. Rev. Barbara Berry-Bailey, Faith Lutheran Church, Chicago, IL, who has worked with white congregations most of her career joined the team later.

The group created a series of workshops all presented by ELCA pastors, illustrating the unique experiences and challenges that face African-Americans who minister in white congregations. Not just satisfied with "group catharsis," the team also worked to learn of effective coping mechanisms allowing participants to leave the gathering with tools to help them overcome the challenges that they face in their ministry.

"Many of us ELCA Pastors of African Descent Serving in White Congregations can tend to feel like Elijah, and thinking, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts... I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away,'" said Berry-Bailey, who is also the ELCA's Associate Director for Companionship – Africa, Global Mission. "This gathering was a remedy for the isolation that I sometimes feel," said Berry-Bailey. "As my siblings in Christ shared their stories, as we broke bread together and laughed and cried, I was ready to, 'Go, return' to lift up my head and feel the blessings of God through the gift of this supportive community."



*Rev. Barbara Berry-Bailey*

The gathering commenced with a worship service featuring an uplifting sermon by the Rev. Dr. Gemechis Buba, ELCA's Director for African National Ministries. The workshops featured October 23 were *Margins to Mainstream*, with Rev. Andrea Walker, *From Hood to Hill* with Rev. Cobble; "*Non-Transitional = Comfortably White Congregations*" with Berry-Bailey and Lester Newberry White; *Asleep Under The Broom Tree: Clergy Self Care* with Rev. Gwendolyn Johnson-Bond and Rev. Neil Bond of St. Peter Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, PA.



***Rev. Andrea Walker has a discussion with Rev. David Maddox II and students from Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg***

“Exploring past choices, how others treat us, our challenging situations in the parish, ineffective and effective habits, we identified through powerful self expression areas of concerns and areas we can influence in the ministries of the congregations we serve or served,” said Newberry White, who has served in Dallas, New Orleans, St. Croix, and served as Transition Pastor in Birmingham and Mobile, Alabama

“When we are alone and feel separated from community, it seems like we dismiss being proactive as trivial or unproductive,” said Newberry White. “However, this gathering called us back to Christ community where healing requires conscious impractical, bold, and daring creativity. It was clear from listening to each other that we have become transition persons called to inspire trust and pass on effective habits that strengthen and lift up each other spirits so we can ‘walk our talk.’”

Workshops featured on October 23 were *An Introduction to Internalized Racial Oppression*, with Christine May, Director of Racial Justice Ministries, Multicultural Ministries, ELCA; *Racial Transition: White to Black*, Rev. Nathaniel Adams, Euclid Lutheran Church, Euclid, OH; and *Tools for Embracing the Pastoral Role*, Rev. Beverly Conway, Redeemer Lutheran Church, South Holland, IL.

The participants had many opportunities for fellowship, networking and sharing in spite of an extensive schedule. "The ability to hear each other's stories was so valuable. I wish we could continue it, in a group forum, perhaps, where we could continue to learn, be fed by and share disappointments and triumphs," said Rev. Pat Kauffman of St Peter Lutheran Church, Port Jervis, NY. "I found the entire experience so uplifting and inspiring; especially the worship. How valuable it was to discern that we do not labor alone, and to discover brothers and sisters on our same unique journey."

Lester Newberry White explained, "Those of us who are ELCA pastors of African descent serving in white congregations expand our circle of influence for the transformation of people's lives unconsciously. The gathering offered direct and profound opportunities of conscious sharing one on one, as well as opportunities for contributing to others in a way that modeled accountability, authenticity and integrity. The listening for God was both a gift and a responsibility of heart and mind. For me, the gathering was an opportunity for us to pause and reflect about our giftedness and our need for balance lest we forget to develop Christ gift of discernment. Facing the daily challenges of serving in a white congregation or unanticipated missions can sometimes distract us from what matters most. Are we in a context that is opportunity or opposition? The gathering helped us deal with the need to focus, the need to be open to the unexpected and a future based on God's possibilities."

The conference ended with a sending worship service presided by Rev. Sherman Hicks, Executive Director, Multicultural Ministries, ELCA and Rev. Brenda Smith, Director for Discipleship, ELCA, with music from the Lutheran Center Gospel Choir featuring Rev. Michael Cobbler on trombone.

"My experience of *Called to the Whole Church* was a positive one," said Rev. Angela Shannon. "Historically, ordained and lay professional leaders of color were pigeon-holed (and) called to serve ethnic specific populations in the ELCA. This conference was an important first self-correcting behavior of the church. Moreover, the content was extremely helpful and the networking provided opportunities for continued mutual support. I am glad that I participated."



*Rev. Linda Boston, Rev. Neil Bond and Rev. Gwendolyn Bond*

“What I appreciated was the care and attention that was poured into this event,” wrote one participant in the evaluation of the gathering. “There was authentic sharing of stories and of pain, but yet there was abundant hope in Christ. I liked the honest attempt to attend to the practical considerations in the daily reality of serving in white contexts... This gathering exceeded my expectations by light years.”

Rev. Lester Newberry White pondered, “As for me, I walked away with a new personal goal: to expand our circle of influence so it is larger than our circle of concerns. I left the event considering the question, ‘What action will I take in my circle of influence... to make a difference?’ ”



*Rev. Angela Shannon, Rev. Brenda Smith and Rev. Rochelle Lewis*



*Seminarians receive advice and encouragement from Rev. Beverly Conway*



*Rev. Michael Cobbler and Rev. Ray LeBlanc, Chair of the African Descent Outreach Strategy Team*



*Rev. Michael Cobbler, Anteneh Gebreselassie (LTSG) and Rev. Dr. Harvard Stephens Jr. (Carthage College)*

