



We Say That We Are Lutherans

U.S. Virgin Islanders and Other African Americans within the ELCA

JULIUS CARROLL

My wife, Geneva, and I were worshipping at a Lutheran congregation in South Carolina that had historically taken a seminarian from the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary for field education. The pastor of this congregation had not responded to my invitation to serve as a field education supervisor for the coming year, so I was hanging back in the “receiving line” to ask her personally if she would accept my invitation. An elderly southern gentleman standing in line to greet the pastor said to my wife: “Aren’t you people Baptist?” My wife responded that we were not Baptist, but Lutheran, and that in fact her husband was on the Lutheran seminary faculty in Columbia. The gentleman was incredulous, and as he shook the (now embarrassed) pastor’s hand, he loudly protested: “But pastor, they say that they are Lutheran!”

THE “MOTHER” CHURCH IN THE WEST INDIES

George Handley, a member of the class of 1956 at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, wrote a pamphlet describing the genesis of what is now the oldest Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation and the

Currently, the baptized membership in the ELCA of people of African descent stands at about 54,000. They share a long and honorable history, beginning already in the seventeenth century—a history that deserves to be known more fully among Lutherans and other American Christians of all ethnic backgrounds.

“mother” church of African-descent Lutheranism in the Western hemisphere. Handley writes:

As was common in the seventeenth century, the “State Church” of a nation followed that nation’s seamen, adventurers, and explorers into the so-called “new” parts of the world....There colonies were to be established. There, wealth was to be acquired. Likewise, in such places, the church would be spread or, at least, it would be established. This was the case with the founding of the Danish West Indies in 1666.¹

Handley describes the initial missionary effort of the Danish sea captain Erik Nielsen Smidt (later to be the first governor of the Danish Colony) and Pastor Kjeld Jenson Slagelse, the missionary sent by the Danish monarchy to begin a ministry of the gospel among Danish pioneers living on St. Thomas. Pastor Handley reports that evangelization among the Danes was slow. Losses by death were great in the unfamiliar tropical climate. Likewise, a considerable number of colonists died at sea in transport to the West Indies. Pastor Slagelse himself died while making his second voyage to St. Thomas. Pastor Handley describes the hardships that befell the Danes living in an unfamiliar climate; the death of pastors; the edict of Governor Jorgen Iversen that made attendance at worship mandatory; the various locations of the congregation while remaining on the island of St. Thomas; two worshiping congregations—Danish and African descent—and church buildings destroyed by fire or hurricane. Handley writes:

The work of the missionaries was, at first, separate and distinct from the work of the Danish Lutheran ministers on the island. They were specifically to devote their energies toward the non-Christians. To do this, they had to learn the Creole language; for Creole preceded English as the language of the West Indies’ Negroes.²

Joseph Donnell II chronicles the process of liturgical inculturation within the life of the Danish West Indies Lutheran Church. He reports that “the first baptism of an African slave [was] recorded by Pastor Christian Fischer on the island of St. Thomas in 1713. A few years later in 1718 Pastor Hans Christian Brandt baptized a few more slaves. Brandt is credited with baptism among the ‘coloured’ on both St. Thomas and St. John.”³ The language initially used in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and the Rite of Confirmation was Danish. Thus, the voice of the African-descent West Indians was neither honored nor used within the life of the congregation. Gradually, however, missionaries began to use Creole in their catechesis. In his article “What Price Inclusion?” Michael Lee Cobbler states:

The slave trade, which is the means by which blacks were brought to

¹George Handley, *A Short History of Frederick Evan. Lutheran Church, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, 1955) 2.

²Ibid., 4.

³Joseph A. Donnell II, “Like Other People’s Children: The Danish West Indies Lutheran Mission: A Caribbean Prototype of Liturgical Inculturation” (PhD diss., Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, 2008) 53.

St. Thomas, was begun in 1673. This was a response to the failure of the experiment of using Danish convicts for manual labor. In 1687, the Danish West Indian Company began slave trade, and the trading was at its peak in 1725, when there were 4,490 slaves on St. Thomas. It is interesting to note that most of the Africans who were imported were slaves in Africa.⁴

the people of Frederick Evangelical Lutheran Church celebrate living in the dialectical tension of being African-Caribbean in a predominantly European denomination

The year 1848 brought an Emancipation Proclamation freeing all the slaves in the Danish West Indies. “This brought about little change, however, in the life of the Lutheran Church here, because—at the time of the proclamation—only about one-sixth of the mission congregation was unfree.”⁵ Negotiations between the governments of Denmark and the United States regarding the transfer of the three islands (now known as the United States Virgin Islands) lasted from 1867 until March 31, 1917. Handley writes: “This transfer necessitated a great deal of adjustment for the Lutheran Church, for it meant that the church would become an independent congregation after two and a half centuries of being the established State Church.”⁶ In the first quarter of the twentieth century the number of Danes living on St. Thomas was so minimal that the two congregations merged into one English-speaking congregation. Danish language services were occasionally held, the last one in 1949. Today, proud of their Danish cultural heritage and aware of their African roots, the people of Frederick Evangelical Lutheran Church celebrate living in the dialectical tension of being African-Caribbean in a predominantly European denomination. The lilt of their voices and the beat of their music proclaim their celebration of being the “mother” church of African-descent Lutheranism in the Western hemisphere, as well as being the oldest continuing congregation in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

AFRICAN AMERICAN LUTHERANS ON THE U.S. MAINLAND

Testifying to early evangelical outreach efforts among African Americans within the predecessor bodies of the ELCA (specifically, the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church), a man of African descent by the name of “Emmanuel” was baptized on Palm Sunday, 1669, in New York City by Jacob Fabritius, a Lutheran pastor. Cobbler reports that a Pastor Justus Falckner, the first Protestant ordained in North America, baptized and married blacks during his ministry in Albany, New York, New York City, and northern New Jersey.⁷

⁴Michael Lee Cobbler, “What Price Inclusion?” in *The Mt. Airy Parish Practice Notebook*, no. 19 (Philadelphia: Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, 1982) 1.

⁵Handley, *A Short History*, 5.

⁶*Ibid.*, 6.

⁷Cobbler, “What Price Inclusion?” 2.

One of the churches that Justus Falckner began was Zion Lutheran Church, now in Oldwick, Hunterdon County, New Jersey, and Zion's first service was held in a free black man's home. Aree Van Guin was a slave who bought his freedom and bought some land in the Raritan Valley in 1708. There was a law which prohibited the ownership of land by slaves [or former slaves] but the deed was transferred to his name in 1724. Three children were baptized on August 1, 1714, one of them...a black for whom the Van Guins were sponsors.⁸

Cobbler writes of a Caucasian Lutheran pastor with an unusual passion for reaching out to people of African descent. Pastor John Bachman "was directly responsible for the training of the first two black Lutheran pastors, the first black overseas missionary, and the number of black persons in the South Carolina Synod."⁹ Regarding John Bachman's ministry in Charleston, South Carolina, Cobbler continues:

In 1825 St. John's parochial report listed ninety-two black communicants, and in 1831 and again in 1845 the congregation had to enlarge its seating space reserved for black worshippers....The scope of Bachman's work can be shown in the number of baptisms of blacks he did....In 1829 he baptized 29 blacks; all other Lutheran pastors in the synod baptized nine. The following year Bachman baptized 40; all other pastors six....Bachman was not the only pastor to work among the blacks, but his work was the most extensive.¹⁰

Three men came out of St. John's parish in Charleston to become the initial Lutheran pastors of African descent: Jehu Jones, Daniel A. Payne, and Boston J. Drayton.

Jehu Jones

Mr. Jones was a free black man whose vocation was tailoring. As a congregant of St. John's in Charleston, it is surmised that he indicated to Pastor Bachman his desire to become a Lutheran missionary to the continent of Africa. Jones traveled to New York City with letters of recommendation from Pastor Bachman and other Charlestonian gentlemen attesting to his good character. The goal was to share these letters with the Ministerium, but Jones arrived in New York after the meeting had adjourned. Cobbler reports:

Several of the pastors, however, were still in New York City when he [Jones] arrived, so they took it upon themselves to "assemble together as a self-constituted body" in order to arrive at a "decisive and instant action." Jones was accordingly ordained and the matter was reported the following year to the Ministerium, which decided that in the emergency the brethren had done well and their act was thus approved.¹¹

Pastor Jehu Jones later had a change in vocational interest, and in 1834 he began a

⁸Ibid., 3.

⁹Ibid., 5.

¹⁰Ibid., 3.

¹¹Ibid., 3, 4.

domestic mission in Philadelphia: St. Paul's Colored Lutheran Church. In spite of a valiant effort by Pastor Jones to raise the money needed to keep the mission afloat, St. Paul's did not survive.

Daniel Alexander Payne

I take great delight in reminding my African Methodist Episcopal (AME) colleagues that Daniel Payne, the second Presiding Bishop of the AME, started out as a Lutheran minister! Payne was a freed black Charlestonian who was orphaned before his tenth birthday. He became well educated and began his own school at the age of eighteen. White and black students attended Dr. Payne's school, to the chagrin of the slaveholding population. A state law was passed, specifically aimed at Payne. It forbade persons of color to teach in or administer their own schools. Disheartened, Payne headed north to fulfill his vocation in education. The aforementioned John Bachman was one of the leaders of Charleston to write Payne a letter of recommendation. Payne was advised by well-meaning white people to go to Africa in order to fulfill his teaching ambitions. He rejected that advice and—reluctantly—entered the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. Cobbler reports: "Payne went to Gettysburg on two conditions—that he would not have to embrace the teachings of the Lutheran Church, and that his training would not be in African colonization."¹² These two caveats were agreed to, and Daniel became a student of theology of great distinction.

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Payne affiliated himself with the Franckean Synod, a synod that advocated for the emancipation of American slaves. Payne was called to a black Lutheran congregation in Troy, New York, and was ordained on June 9, 1839. But he took ill soon after his ordination and relocated to Philadelphia, where he began to interact with Richard Allen, the first Presiding Bishop of the AME, who invited Payne to affiliate with them. Being an honorable man, Pastor Payne wanted to sever his relationship with the Franckean Synod by repaying his financial debt. Cobbler recounts: "The synod insisted on receiving the money before his severing connections with them. His request was turned down, he never sent them the money, and his name was dropped from the rolls of Synod in 1846."¹³ It was not until forty-four years later, in 1890, that Payne was noted by the synod: "He had made good in the [African Methodist Episcopal] Church...his qualification had induced this body to elect him as their bishop, and...he was highly esteemed for his great usefulness."¹⁴ The mid- to late years of Dr. Payne's life were distinguished by his

¹²Ibid., 4.

¹³Ibid., 5.

¹⁴Harry J. Kreider, *Lutheranism in Colonial New York* (New York: Edwards Brothers, 1942) 264.

service as the second Presiding Bishop of the AME and as founding president of Wilberforce University, an historically black institution of higher learning. “Usefulness”—indeed!

Boston J. Drayton

Mr. Drayton was an active member of St. John’s, Charleston. He informed Pastor Bachman that he felt God’s call to go to Liberia as a Christian missionary. Drayton was ordained in 1845 and departed later in that year. Cobbler reports:

It is not clear how long Drayton kept at mission work, but apparently he had become an important member of the Liberian community, for when he died in 1866, he was noted as one who had served as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Liberia, and also served as Governor of the neighboring African state of “Maryland,” until it was merged with Liberia in 1857.¹⁵

AFRICAN AMERICAN LUTHERANS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

Susan Wilds McArver, in her dissertation describing Lutherans and cultural change in South Carolina (1886–1918), reports: “Despite the large number of blacks in the South Carolina Synod before the Civil War, most blacks after emancipation, like those in other white southern denominations gradually left and formed churches of their own which were not Lutheran.”¹⁶

The “War between the States” had a significant impact on African American Lutheranism. As free Americans, Lutherans of African descent after 1865 had a newfound voice. In the southern states, two distinct strategies were established by synods in dealing with their members of African descent who were now free. The first was to pretend that nothing had changed in terms of the white ecclesiastical structure relating to the black person. One way this was carried out was to maintain the congregation’s multiracial worship experience with the opening up of seating arrangements. The second strategy was to encourage black Lutherans to form their own congregations. Regarding the first strategy, in South Carolina where there were the greatest numbers of Lutherans of African descent: “Signs of the growing friction were seen in the Lutheran newspapers and even in St. John’s, Charleston, where the Vestry received complaint of ‘the habit of encroaching on white seats and mixing in the same pews with the whites by the freedmen.’”¹⁷ The living out of a multiracial Christian community within South Carolina ended in 1869, when the synod parochial reports omitted the columns for colored membership and changed their constitutions to allow only “male white” membership. The later synodical strategy of establishing ethnic-specific new starts (to use the nomenclature of the ELCA) was used successfully by the North Carolina Synod in 1868, when the synod licensed Michael M. Coble, who was also allowed to admin-

¹⁵Cobbler, “What Price Inclusion?” 5.

¹⁶Susan Wilds McArver, “A Spiritual Wayside Inn: Lutherans, The New South and Cultural Change in South Carolina, 1886–1918” (PhD diss., Duke University, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1995) 394.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 5.

ister communion, and he seemed to do well. A few black men were licensed over the following years, but none were ordained. In 1880, the General Synod ordained D. J. Koontz of the North Carolina Synod. In 1884, Nathan Clapp and Samuel Holt were added to the ever-so-small group of black Lutheran pastors, but they still were not allowed to take part in synodical functions, and they received little to no support.

In a sign of self-determination, the African-descent pastors cited above sought permission from the North Carolina Synod to establish a non-geographical synod (in ELCA nomenclature, once again) called The Alpha Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Freedmen in America. This self-determinative synod survived for only one year, from 1889 to 1890, due to the death of Pastor Koontz and the resignations of Pastors Holt and Clapp under pressure from Pastor Bakke (a white man!), the director of colored missions of the Synodical Conference. There have been a number of times in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries when Lutheran clergy and seminarians of African descent have, in assembly, called for a “resurrection” of the Alpha Synod. Clergy and seminarian voices go silent, however, when the issue of financial sustainability of such a synod is raised. Just as the colored missions of the Synodical Conference in North Carolina held sway via its financial clout, so too the churchwide units of the ELCA in their financial support of black congregations create a barrier to self-determination that is difficult for congregations of African descent to cross.

in 1880, the first Negro congregation in New York State to apply for synodical membership was Trinity Lutheran in Greenport, Long Island

The post-Civil War period brought evangelization, within a Lutheran context, among African-descent people in the North, as well. In 1880, the first Negro congregation in New York State to apply for synodical membership was Trinity Lutheran in Greenport, Long Island. When, however, Trinity’s mission pastor left for Hartford, Connecticut, the synod rejected the African American congregation’s membership in the synod and added insult to injury by giving the synod’s financial support to the white congregation in Hartford in order to ease their congregational debt. The rationale given by the Committee on Applications for reallocating the funds was that if they gave the money to the black people there would be ecclesiastical difficulties to follow. The Synod Conference, however, rejected the committee’s recommendation and received the African-descent congregation into synodical membership. In subsequent years, “Trinity” extended invitations to Methodist and Baptist clergy to serve as their pastors, pursuant to synodical processes for the ordination of clergy. The relationship between these candidates for ordination and synodical staff never developed, and in 1885 the Greenport colored church, not having reported for three years, was dropped from the rolls.

That same year saw better news regarding outreach to the African-descent community in Washington, DC. Luther Place Memorial Church attempted to reach out to the Lutherans of Caribbean descent coming to the mainland as students at Howard University, a historically black institution of higher learning. Luther Place's Vestry decided to call Daniel Wiseman, a Lutheran from St. Croix, the Dutch West Indies, as their assistant pastor with sole responsibility for beginning a mission church among Lutherans of African descent. Pastor Wiseman and his wife not only served in a pastoral role among Howard's students who were Lutherans of many generations on the islands of the Caribbean, but also used their home as a bed and breakfast for many students over a forty-year period. Pastor Wiseman established the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer in 1885. It stands as the oldest extant indigenous African American Lutheran church on the mainland of the United States of America. This author is proud to have served as its fourth pastor in its one-hundred-and-twenty-five year history!

The archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America contains a document entitled: "The Major Events in the Evangelizing of Black People within the Lutheran Church in the New World."¹⁸ Part of it reads as follows:

Lutherans established the first seminary/college to train black pastors and Christian day school teachers at Concord, North Carolina (1901); Lutherans established a second school at Selma, Alabama, to train full-time black church workers. This was the first Lutheran school of higher education to be staffed solely by blacks (1922); Lutherans established a third training facility (the Alabama Lutheran Bible Institute at Montgomery, AL) for black full-time church workers (1947) and after almost 20 years of discussion, a number of Lutheran bodies (specifically the American Lutheran Church and the United Lutheran Church) attempted to engage in a cooperative approach to work in the black community under the administration of the National Lutheran Council (1950).

Also found in a scrapbook in the ELCA's archives was a notation that in 1950 the American Lutheran Church (ALC) called Pastor Ervin Krebs (a white man!) to direct their efforts within the African-descent community. Pastor Krebs cited the following as necessary for the Lutheran Church to be successful in evangelization among black people:

1. Negroes are to be treated as equals in the Lutheran Church with a dose of denominational patience as the Negroes learn the history and polity of the ALC, grow in financial stewardship (due to their low economic stratum and minimal education) and appreciation of Lutheran worship.
2. The ALC must appreciate the Negroes' irregular work hours (working as they do as maids and janitors) while attending to the task of thorough doctrinal teaching due to their lack of Christian educational backgrounds.

¹⁸Jeff Johnson, "The Major Events in the Evangelizing of Black People within the Lutheran Church in the New World," in *Missionary to America: The History of Lutheran Outreach to Americans; Essays and Reports 1992* (St. Louis: Lutheran Historical Conference, 1994).

3. The ALC most understand the Negroes' background of emotional preaching by pastors and thus, liturgical education must be offered.¹⁹

I trust that the above serves as an educational resource—perhaps even to that elderly gentleman mentioned in the opening paragraph of this essay who was incredulous that people of African descent might be Lutheran. To be sure, the history of Lutherans of African descent here in the United States and the Virgin Islands has yet to be definitively written—but, yes, we say that we are Lutherans! Baptized African-descent membership in the ELCA stands at around fifty-four thousand; there are over two hundred and forty congregations with at least twenty percent African-descent members, and public ministry leadership (clergy and lay) stands at over two hundred and fifty persons.

Yes, we say that we are Lutherans—and have been for three hundred and forty-four years! ☩

JULIUS CARROLL serves as associate professor of contextual education at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina. He served as director for African Descent Ministries/Multicultural Ministries Program Unit, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. His DMin project was titled “A Theology of African Descent Lutheranism” (Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2004).

¹⁹National Lutheran Council (1918–1966), Division for Mission in North America (1947–1961), Chicago: Publications, Studies Scrapbook, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Archives.