

ELCA Sets Out to Fill Pews with Non-Whites, Youth

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Young adults are restless with the way things are in the church. So the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America is doing something about it.

The ELCA, like many mainline denominations, is approximately 97 percent white and is increasingly becoming an "older body."

"When I'm with young adults, I pick up on your restlessness with the way things are," said the Rev. Mark S. Hanson, ELCA presiding bishop, at a recent meeting involving African young adults. "You know that this is not the way God intends the church to be or the world to be."

Hanson met with 32 young adults of African descent nominated by ELCA congregations to give advice on how to attract more young adults and more people of color to the denomination.

The event, "Breaking the Barriers: An African Descent Young Adult Consultation," was hosted by ELCA Multicultural Ministries at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago.

In recent years, the ELCA set out to become more diverse in culture and age.

Although the commitments are there, Hanson asked, "Why are we having so much trouble achieving them?"

Representative of the churched young adults, participants at the consultation said the older members of their congregations tend to hold on to their roles or insist that those roles not change, according to the Rev Julius Carroll IV, director of African American ministries, ELCA Multicultural Ministries.

Many congregations are not open to new things, like a Sunday afternoon "hip hop" service, he said, according to the ELCA News Service.

In terms of lack of young adult involvement in the church, participants said they were not even aware of all the ministry opportunities in the ELCA.

And racism remains a problem in the predominantly white church.

"Too often we white folks think we need people of color to shore up the declining membership of a largely white church," said Hanson. And, "too often we white folks say

racism is a problem persons of color must solve on our behalf, and we put the burden of racism on your shoulders rather than take responsibility for it."

The solution begins with the head of the church – a white male.

"I come to great power and great privilege because I am a white male in this church and this society," he said. "Unless I confront that white privilege every day, I can't expect the church to confront it in its institutional life, its congregational life, in the lives of individuals."

Hanson acknowledged that it's going to take more than one weekend of antiracism training to end racism in the church. And it's going to take more than just trying to survive as a church. The real goal is transformation.

"Largely white congregations in a largely white church are simply unwilling to confront the realities of how we will be changed by virtue of the presence of persons of color in our midst," Hanson said.

"If you (people of color) choose to stay, we expect you to become increasingly like us," he added. "That's not a biblical view of transformation."

Hanson is not looking for more African congregations or other ethnic congregations within the ELCA. The denomination is already fairing well with that.

Instead, Hanson wants to take the huge step of integrating the cultural groups together to become a "multicultural" church.

"We are called to be multicultural, multi-lingual, a Pentecost people each in their own language proclaiming the mighty deeds of God but each hearing the other in that proclamation," he said. "So, the step from being culture-specific to multicultural is a huge and difficult step."

What the ELCA looks like today is a denomination that claims 4.85 million members. Among them, fewer than 170 people of color are in the process to become clergy, according to the Rev. M. Wyvetta Bullock, executive for leadership development.

Among the 32 African young adults who were consulted, 18 said they would consider professional church careers. The goal of the consultation's organizers was to have at

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