As a synod, I believe that we must learn to talk to and with each other about the reality of race. That is to say that even in 2013 the color of your skin still plays an enormous role in determining the options, expectations, choices and future that may be available to you. Our life experiences are shaped by how we are perceived by others, and many people of color are only too familiar with the many subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways that our society continues to regard them as outsiders or strangers.

Report of the bishop, 2013 Southeast Michigan Synod Assembly

Synod conversations on race

After attending a conversation on race sponsored by a local nonprofit organization, Bishop Don Kreiss was invited by the same group to engage in a similar conversation with members from within the Southeast Michigan Synod.

The bishop; Robin McCants, assistant to the bishop for advocacy and urban ministry; and the Revs. Julianne Smec and Michael Johnson, co-chairs of BRRICK (Building Racial Reconciliation in Christ’s Kingdom), met with leaders of New Detroit to determine a process and other objectives for the conversations, which took place in 2014.

‘Across the South, we have a deep appreciation of history. We haven’t always had a deep appreciation of each other’s history.’

The Rev. Clementa Pinckney, one of nine people killed at Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina

One question that continues to be asked by many members of our denomination, especially those who do not identify as people of color, is often: “How do you start conversations about race?”

Part of that question has to do with fear. The fear of saying the wrong thing, of being too defensive, of being too passive—all are reasons used to avoid the conversation. Fear is huge. Fear is real. Fear is also paralyzing.

These facilitated conversations provided another outlet for the community to come together as the body of Christ. With approximately 10 to 15 participants selected from Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties, New Detroit’s “Metropolitan Detroit Race Equity Report” was the tool used to start our conversations.

Why use the Race Equity Report? As a tool it identified “clearly measurable disparities among different racial and ethnic groups in this region in educational achievement, in per capita income, in home ownership and in other measurements. Those disparities exist in every geographic area in southeast Michigan. They make it all too clear we are nowhere near achieving a post-racial society.”

A fourth conversation was facilitated by New Detroit staff, specifically for BRRICK team members to help them understand challenges in doing this work in a healthy and non-confrontational way.

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Synod addresses New Detroit board members

Bishop Don Kreiss, also a New Detroit board trustee, and the Rev. Manisha Dostert, former pastor of Spirit of Grace Lutheran-Episcopal Church in West Bloomfield and now associate rector of Christ Church Cranbrook (Episcopal) in West Bloomfield, were invited to a panel discussion on race at New Detroit’s May 2015 board meeting. The invitation was a follow-up to the synod’s conversations the previous year. As panelists, Dostert and Kreiss responded to the following questions:

- Why was there a need to have a conversation on race with leaders of the synod?
- What did you gain from the conversations?
- How have you used the experience in your congregations?
- What do you envision as the next step?

Some of their responses to those questions are included in this article.

Kreiss: This synod territory is 11 counties and 120 congregations. The makeup of the ELCA is historically and predominately a northern European, Anglo-centric organization—Lutherans come out of Germany and Scandinavian countries.

Moving into the office of the bishop from a parish in Farmington Hills, one of my commitments was to engage the synod in honest conversations about race. What does it mean that we have different life experiences because of the color of our skin? What does it mean that we have different life experiences because of the difference in educational opportunities? Or different church experiences because the congregations I served are overwhelmingly white as opposed to [the experiences of] congregations and clergy leaders of color? It was to that end that I invited folks to the table with New Detroit leadership facilitating conversations on race.

Dostert: This was the first time, in 10 years of living in Southeast Michigan that I had received an invitation to participate in conversations about race. I previously lived in Durham, N.C., where there was always talk about race issues—deliberate and intentional as part of church and community. When we moved to Oakland County, I was stunned only to see people of the white majority race and those of Indian descent, like myself, and not many African-Americans. Ten years later, I have come to expect it. As the church we have a responsibility and the gift to speak to the things that affect people deeply, and the truth was Oakland County churches were not speaking about race.

I was grateful for an invitation to come to the table. One of my takeaways is it really does take the leader of an organization like the bishop to say, “We are going to talk about race!”

Dostert: There were three conversations about race that were created with slight agendas around self-experiences, education and transportation. But you can’t meet with a person three times and really know them, so I look forward to what comes next.

Kreiss: One of the pieces of my agenda as bishop includes having places where folks of faith gather to also gather around deep conversations about what we have in common as well as our differences. That means I am willing to listen and be guided into an understanding.

Even if I don’t “get it,” I’m willing to walk alongside those who are living the experience.

The 15 leaders around the table, all from the tri-county

New Detroit Inc. (www.newdetroit.org/cms) was formed in response to Detroit’s civil unrest in 1967 at the request of then Michigan Gov. George Romney and Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh. A coalition, led by business executive Joseph L. Hudson Jr., was convened to identify what went wrong in July 1967, what needed to change and how to make that change happen.

Since then, New Detroit Inc. has been a unique and valuable arena where leaders of Detroit’s business, civic, grassroots, and religious communities have come together to plan cooperative strategies, provide a forum for community leaders to come together to listen and learn from each other, and serve as a regional forum for sensitive issues among individuals who might otherwise have no contact. The coalition has worked to impact the actions of individuals and institutions by serving as advocate, catalyst, convener and facilitator.
The following represent some of the conversations that have occurred during Don Kreiss’ tenure since his 2011 election as bishop. Organized by BRRICK and synod leadership, these events were planned for different populations of our synod in mind.

- **2011:** A meeting between Kreiss and BRRICK team members to affirm the synod’s support of their efforts on racial justice issues. The bishop indicated his desire to engage in this work.
- **2012:** BRRICK hosts a prayer breakfast featuring Kreiss, who begins to publicly share his vision of addressing race in the Southeast Michigan Synod.
- **2012:** A BRRICK workshop is held at the joint synod assembly in Lansing, where those in attendance received information on suggested resources and a shortened workshop on racial justice.
- **2012:** The first combined peer ministry and racial justice high school camp experience was offered at Michi-Lu-Ca. It continues at Stony Lake as Bridge Builders Camp with an objective to help young leaders engage one another around racial awareness and its impact in our communities, the church and beyond.
- **2013:** A Crossroads Anti-Racism Training was provided for members of the synod staff, Synod Council, deans, directors and other selected leaders.
- **2013:** Kreiss announced race as one of his priorities for the Southeast Michigan Synod during his report to the assembly.
- **2013:** The winter leadership event, “Conversations about Race,” a conference for pastors, licensed lay ministers and professional church workers, was co-sponsored by both the North/West Lower and Southeast Michigan synods. It was facilitated by the Rev. Jo Ann Mundy of ERACCE (Eliminating Racism and Claiming/Celebrating Equality) and the Rev. James Perkinson, professor of social ethics at Ecumenical Theological Seminary, Detroit, both of whom are strong social justice advocates.
- **2014:** Conversations on race, facilitated by New Detroit Inc. (See page B for more information about New Detroit).

Continued from page B

area, were able to talk about community issues and personal issues without judgment, but with the realization that we are all in this together as the body of Christ, which is not just a metaphor, but a way for us to truly live together. Although we are deeply and profoundly connected, we cannot be together until we are willing to be honest.

**Racism: It’s not my fault. I’m not to blame. But I have a responsibility!**

Jo Ann Mundy, ERACCE

**Dostert:** Conversations about race are not a new thing for urban pastors, and I am humbled by those who continue to come to the table, willing to share with their suburban counterparts.

**Issues about race [in the U.S.] cannot be solved by simple table conversations, but there has to be deep, abiding relationships that are intentional and deliberate to cross lines, geographic and historic. When that happens, I believe transformation is inevitable.**

*Kreiss:* Sunday mornings continue to be the most segregated places. To simply accept that on Sunday mornings the communities of faith have historically, traditionally self-segregated is a terrible witness for people of faith. To keep doing it is a terrible way to witness to the community—as the community pays attention to what we do and what we say. Unless our Anglo parishes figure out how to reach out to the communities as sisters and brothers, the future of our tradition is troubled.

To find out more about the conversations or this panel presentation, contact Bishop Don Kreiss at d.kreiss@semisynd.com or the Rev. Manisha Dostert at mdostert@alumi.duke.edu.
Southeast Michigan

Synod hosts global mission festival

The global mission festival that preceded the 2015 Southeast Michigan Synod Assembly featured musicians from all across the country and presentations that shared perspectives on hunger from all over the world. The Rev. Ronald S. Bonner Sr., keynote speaker and pastor of Lutheran Church of the Atonement in Atlanta, shared his thoughts on hunger, some of which are included here:

“There is no moral or ethical reason that nearly 900 million people are chronically hungry and cannot live active and fully functioning lives. Hunger doesn’t just mean missing meals; it also can mean malnourishment.

“Across the globe, conflicts consistently disrupt farming and food production ... forcing millions of people to flee their homes, leading to hunger emergencies as the displaced find themselves without the means to feed themselves. In war, food becomes a weapon. Soldiers will starve opponents into submission by seizing or destroying food and livestock and systematically wrecking local markets. Fields are often mined and water wells contaminated, forcing farmers to abandon their land.

“One of my ingredients for chicken salad is seedless grapes. I buy seedless grapes because I hate having to spit the seeds out. At a healthy eating conference ... it dawned on me: ‘What am I doing and how healthy is seedless fruit? And am I contributing to the economic impoverishment of indigenous farmers, am I contributing to hunger issues because I don’t want to bothered picking out seeds?

“As we hear that systemic causes [of hunger] are addressable, whether human made or natural, there is no good earthly reason people are starving and malnourished in this world. It is not a matter of ‘What can we do?’ but it is a matter of ‘What will we do to address and eradicate this blight on humanity?’ Let’s not leave it up to God to work this out alone. God has done God’s part, let us do ours. ‘God’s work. Our hands.’”

Websites and other resources on race issues

- Teaching Tolerance (www.tolerance.org)
- Sojourners magazine (http://sojo.net/magazine)
- Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion (www.miroundtable.org)
- Ted Talks online video resources (www.ted.com)
- Diversity Inc. (www.diversityinc.com)
- New Detroit Inc.—Race Equity Report (www.newdetroit.org/cms)
- Race Relations & Diversity Task Force in Birmingham, Mich. (http://racerelationsdiversity.org)
- BRRICK (Building Racial Reconciliation in Christ’s Kingdom, a task group of the Southeast Michigan Synod
- Bridge Builders I & II High School Camp, Living Water Ministries
- Judith Roberts, ELCA director for racial justice, Chicago (judith.roberts@elca.org)