

# ASHES TO ACTION

FINDING MYSELF AT THE INTERSECTION  
OF THE MINNEAPOLIS UPRISING

SHARI SEIFERT

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AMPLIFYING  
VOICES  
FOR CHANGE

## ASHES TO ACTION

Finding Myself at the Intersection of the Minneapolis Uprising

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Editor's Note: Text messages and social media posts are lightly edited for punctuation.

*This book is dedicated to those that are starting to do the work of racial justice in our churches and in the world. May we be continually curious learners and become good ancestors.*

*All royalty payments received from the sale of this book will be donated to George Floyd Global Memorial. One way we can help keep history from being whitewashed is to have Black community members tell the story. George Floyd Global Memorial does an amazing job, and it is my honor to support their work. I encourage you to check out George Floyd Global Memorial and to make a donation as well.*

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# FOREWORD

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The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, a block away from Calvary Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis, would bring about a time of transformation born out of tragedy for this congregation and the surrounding neighborhood.

Through the leadership of Shari Seifert and others, this particular congregation responded faithfully.

But the situation could have gone another way. Amidst the global pandemic, the Calvary community could have shuttered our building and retreated from action. Or we could have made the mistake of responding in a way that would create suspicion among our neighbors had we tried to stand out instead of standing with them.

Like many small but mighty urban congregations, Calvary has a long history of engaging with the neighborhood. In its more recent history, Calvary began the challenging work of striving for racial justice in a new way. A strong group of leaders, who you'll read about in these pages, insisted that we could no longer limit our work to organizing and advocating. We needed to prioritize intentional self-reflection *and* congregational reflection. Racial healing comes about not by minimizing for fear of experiencing shame or guilt, but by honestly learning from our past and listening to our sisters and brothers who continue to suffer from racial injustice.

All of this surely played some role in the approach that we took to this tragedy. We began not by putting together a plan to take charge of something, but by simply showing up, listening, and gently asking, "What is needed of us in this moment?" It was clear from the beginning that our role would be to accompany and support those leading this neighborhood response.

We were unwittingly thrust into this new experience of "church" where it became nearly impossible to distinguish the people of the congregation from the people of the neighborhood. We didn't pull them in—they pulled us out.

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We learned empathy and practiced God's mission not by tactical planning but by listening to the stories of others.

As you will see from her personal story, Shari Seifert has been at this work for a long time. We were fortunate that the elected leaders of the congregation trusted Shari and many others to lead what we could only hope and pray would be an appropriate response to this tragedy.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the beloved community continues to shape what it means to be the church today. Shari's use of this image is powerful in its aspiration—it's both now and not yet!

The tragedy of George Floyd's murder provides a jumping off point for us all to reflect on what it means to align ourselves with our neighborhoods and the work of dismantling white supremacy. When this work makes us uncomfortable, that's okay. As people of faith, we trust that even in the midst of suffering, death, and our own vulnerability, God brings about new life.

Rev. Hans Lee

Pastor at Calvary Lutheran Church, 2018–2022

# CHAPTER 1

# MAY 26, 2020

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On May 26, 2020, at 2:28 a.m., a friend sent me the video of George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I happened to wake up in the middle of the night, and I watched the video without knowing what it was. Sadly I was not shocked. I was *horrified*. I learned the murder happened in south Minneapolis at 38th Street and Chicago Avenue, one block from my church at 39th Street and Chicago—Calvary Lutheran Church.

I knew I needed to jump into action.

I pleaded the following on my Facebook page that day:

Trigger warning—murder by police on video

I am outraged and heartbroken. I just learned that the Minneapolis police murdered a man one block away from my church. We do not need to wait for more information to be outraged, it is all on video. The official Minneapolis Police Department statement was that there were no weapons used and that the man suffered a “medical condition.” Yeah, he died because the police officer kept his knee and weight on this man’s neck while the man begged them to stop and kept saying “I can’t breathe.” All the while another police officer just stands by. I call that knee a weapon. This can’t be swept under the rug—we have video.

And f\*ck white supremacy. We all know the Minneapolis police keep electing a white supremacist as the head of their union. WTH. And church—we have to talk about our role in keeping white supremacy in place. How many of us have white Jesus in stained glass or in paintings on our church walls? We know Jesus was a brown-skinned Palestinian Jewish man executed by the state. How many of our churches use *white* to equal “good” and *black* to equal “evil”? White Lutherans—we need to stop trying to make God in our image and start really seeing Jesus. Part of the body of Christ was just murdered one block from our church—we need to commit ourselves to rooting white supremacy out of ourselves and our church. How else besides white supremacy can you explain the police so callously taking this man’s life while he cried out for his mom.

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Absolutely horrifying. Again.

Protest today—38th and Chicago, 5:00–7:00 p.m. Wear a mask and keep a safe distance.

Then I sent an email to people connected with Multifaith Anti-Racism, Change, & Healing (MARCH) to alert this network of faith-based anti-racist activists about the event and the protest march.

Hi—Could someone send out an email to ask folks to show up to the protest today at 5:00 p.m. at 38th and Chicago? This is *one block* from Calvary. A group of folks are going to meet in the Calvary parking lot at 4:30 to *try* to mark some spots to stand with chalk in hopes of helping with social distancing. Come if you can, and bring chalk if you've got some. I am assuming you have heard the news that the MPD straight up murdered another black man. I advise not watching the video—it's awful.

As a member of the European Descent Lutheran Association for Racial Justice (EDLARJ) board, I also connected with board members to craft this statement:

### May 26, 2020, Statement by EDLARJ

Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd are our neighbors, as are those who have gone before them. Ahmaud Arbery was lynched by a retired police officer and his son while jogging in Brunswick, Georgia (February 23, 2020). Breonna Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old American emergency medical technician, was shot eight times by Louisville Metro Police Department officers who entered her apartment in Louisville, Kentucky, while serving a “no-knock warrant” (March 13, 2020). George Floyd was killed by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, last night (May 25, 2020) while begging for his life, only a block from one of our ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America] congregations, Calvary Lutheran Church. We declare that this is a sin, and that we, as a mostly white church, must repent of our history of racism, as well as our current biases.

In Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus [says]: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

As the European Descent Lutheran Association for Racial Justice (EDLARJ), we condemn the white supremacy that has led to the deaths of so many unarmed Black neighbors in our country. These lynchings are nothing new. We are weary of knowing we are complicit in these murders. But our weariness pales in comparison to the trauma of our Black neighbors. We must, as a church, get to work on dismantling white supremacy. Our siblings are dying around us from our lack of willingness to truly repent of not loving our neighbors as ourselves.