

CALL TO ALLYSHIP

PREPARING YOUR CONGREGATION
FOR LEADERS OF COLOR

ANGELA T. !KHABEB, EDITOR



AMPLIFYING
VOICES
FOR CHANGE

CALL TO ALLYSHIP

Preparing Your Congregation for Leaders of Color

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This book is dedicated to the great cloud of witnesses who surround us on this side of eternity and beyond.

To James and Theresa A. Ruffin, my parents who nurture me.

To the Rev. Helen King Hollingsworth, who introduced me to the ELCA.

To the authors who said YES. You took risks. You told hard truths. You unearthed pain and suffering for the good of the body of Christ.

To the people doing this holy work who know we need to do better.

And finally, to those who have been wounded by the church.

Rev. Angela T. !Khabebe

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FOREWORD

If you're holding this book in your hands, thank you! Your curiosity about how to welcome a BIPOC leader into your midst is to be commended. This is the book I wish many a church council and call committee had read prior to interacting with me. At the time of writing this foreword, I have been in Christian ministry more than twenty-seven years and have been serving in the ELCA approximately fifteen of them.

These authors have surfaced some of the most recurrent issues facing BIPOC leaders in predominantly white churches and organizations. This *Call to Allyship* gives white folks of goodwill a means to start courageous conversations within their spheres of influence.

As Christians, we strive to do no harm. But we confess that even in our churches, we deeply wound others due to our own ignorance or naivete. Rev. Angela !Khabeb and the other authors set up a safety net, both for the BIPOC person seeking a call and the predominantly white congregation that contemplates extending a call to a person of color.

Rev. !Khabeb and her fellow authors come before us with strength, humility, and power, doing the church a great service in their willingness to be both vulnerable as they expose their pain and strong as they offer solutions. No one who contributed to this book pretends that the call to allyship is without costs. You may lose congregation members and friends along the way. But do not lose heart.

By reading this book, you have joined a community of individuals, churches, synods, and communities that are committed to being part of the necessary change to which God has beckoned us! Whether you work in a local church, synod, or churchwide capacity, this book is for you! If you are a part of a church staff, church council, or personnel or mutual ministry team, this book is a must-read if you want to prepare for the possibility that your next leader may

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be BIPOC. And finally, if you are a Christian concerned about justice issues and committed to the call to allyship, this book will guide your way.

Read this book slowly. Read it more than once. Allow yourself to feel—and breathe through—the many emotions that bubble up. Invite your friends, family, colleagues, and community of faith to read the book with you. Discuss it liberally with the white folks in your spheres of influence *and then act decisively*. It is not enough to absorb this precious information with our minds. We must deliberately act with our hearts, bodies, and souls to create safer environments for our siblings of color and richer communities for all of God's children. May it be so.

Rev. Dr. Yolanda Denson-Byers

CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION

ENTERING A STRANGE LAND

Rev. Angela T. !Khabeb

How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? Psalm 137:4

For me, a Black pastor serving in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), one of the whitest denominations in the United States, the lament of this psalmist resonates deeply. Many of my colleagues and I have struggled with the challenge of serving, living, and worshiping in contexts where cultural whiteness is considered the norm and the standard by which all cultures, races, and ethnicities are judged. Whiteness is *not* the norm. But tragically, whiteness has been forced on historically marginalized communities, and assimilation has been compulsory. Typically, members of the nondominant culture must be at least fairly familiar with the norms of the dominant culture in order to survive. But quite frankly, as leaders in a predominantly white denomination, we swim in whiteness and are deeply familiar with the ways it seeps into ministry.

My own call to ministry is rooted in the power of the Lutheran church—its theology. I joined the Lutheran church because of the promise of abundant grace for *everybody*. This message of grace upon grace upon grace countered my experience in other denominations and traditions characterized by messages like “Turn or burn,” “Fly or fry,” and “Get right or get left . . . behind!”

I encountered the Lutheran theological worldview during my late teens and early twenties, when I followed my mentor and pastor into the Lutheran fold. When I read and heard and wrote about this theology on paper, I was in. I was *all* the way in and ready to sing the Lord's song.

But then I found out that what was on paper did not ring true with what was being practiced. Instead, I found myself in a strange land. Living out my call in real life led me to serving alongside people who did not recognize my full humanity. I expected to enter the Promised Land. Unfortunately, it was more like Babylon. It felt like entering a strange land every day. And I am not

alone in my experience. Fellow leaders of color agree with me that this strange land we find ourselves in feels stressful and foreboding. How can we sing the Lord's song as we are called to do?

And why would a person of color even *want* to be part of the ELCA? I have lost count of how many times I've asked myself this question. I fear I'm running out of answers. Siblings in Christ, it is time to heed the call to become allies of the gifted leaders of color in the ELCA so they no longer need to travel through strange lands. Before you call a ministry leader who is a person of color to your congregation, you have a responsibility to commit to preparing the way. This preparation work will not be easy, yet it is necessary.

This book you are holding can help you. Its purpose is to encourage predominantly white congregations who want to have people of color as their leaders to engage in preparatory work before calling that person to their congregation. It is my hope and the hope of all this book's authors that *Call to Allyship* will reduce the harm experienced by these leaders. We understand that people will make mistakes unwittingly, yet some of those mistakes are tragic and enduring. Therefore, we need to be more careful and intentional as the body of Christ.

A GUIDE TO READING THIS BOOK

This book is authored by several leaders of color in the ELCA. In the following chapters you will experience their stories—a priceless trove of trauma, troubles, and triumph. Some authors will ask questions or offer invitations to ponder, pray, or explore. They also issue calls to action. Each contributor brings their own perspective, experiences, and literary style. Each is worth listening to and learning from as you live into your call to allyship.

Here are some people who should read this book:

- › your church's staff members
- › members of your church council
- › your church's racial justice team
- › the call committee that is charged with calling your next rostered minister
- › the personnel committee that hires nonrostered staff members
- › your whole congregation
- › synod staff members
- › churchwide organization teams