The Inner-City Call

[Siloah Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 2, 1975]
By Rolfe F. Westendorf

Dear Steve,

I was very pleased to learn that God has called you to work with us in the inner-city. In my opinion this is one of the most rewarding mission fields in the world, and we very much in need of people like yourself to help bring in the harvest.

I know you are excited about your call and anxious to begin. And I suppose that you are somewhat apprehensive about your ability to serve in this field. Naturally there are special challenges in any mission work, but the work of inner-city missions is different from most. Much of your work wall involve direct contact with people of the black race, and coming from a small town in Minnesota, your personal experience with blacks has been very limited.

In this rather lengthy letter, I want to try to ease some of your apprehensions by giving you the benefit of my years of experience as a white pastor working among blacks. I certainly don't consider myself an expert in the field. But I think I can tell you some things that will help give you a head start in your relationships with your black brothers and sisters in Christ. So I offer these thoughts to you with the prayer that you will understand what I'm trying to say, and that this understanding will make your work among us more pleasant and re warding.

On the other hand, I don't expect to prepare you fully for your experiences in inner-city mission work. Empathy for people of another race and culture is not something you can learn by study. Such empathy is rather one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which is called "charity" or "love" in I Corinthians 13. The attitudes that could help you understand a demanding professor, or a shy classmate, or an overly concerned mother, these are attitudes that will enable you to overcome racial barriers and win the respect and love of your black fellow Christians. What I am going to tell you can only help to direct your empathy so that you don't in ignorance make mistakes that could easily have been-avoided.

So don't expect that you can memorize these pages and then proceed to win friends and influence people who happen to be black. No amount of inner-city expertise can compensate for an insensitive heart. Your black brothers and sisters will quickly forgive the ignorance of someone who obviously cares. Besides the sensitive person will quickly learn what is right and what is wrong in his black-white relations, with or without the guidance of others.

So accept my advice for what it is worth, no more than that. And pray for a Christ-like heart that understands and forgives and seeks the benefit of strangers as well as friends. More than anything else, this will equip you to work effectively in the Black community.

Point One—The Black Person

A black person is a person who happens to be black. That, of course, shouldn't have to be said. But it needs to be said anyhow. Regularly I am shocked, and a little ashamed of myself. I still find myself surprised that black persons have inner feelings just like my own. I remember best the day I stood on the front porch with a lay evangelist. The lady of the house came to the door and cautiously peered out the window before turning the key. The evangelist (who happened to be a woman) said with some amazement, "She's as scared in this neighborhood as I am."

Now, of course, why shouldn't the lady of the house be scared? She spends her whole life in a high-crime area. She's seen a lot more to frighten her than the suburb-dwelling evangelist. The chances of meeting a rapist at her door are much more likely than in some other places. So why didn't we expect her to be scared?

The answer is that she was black, and that to our white minds made her immune or at least callused to the dangers of inner-city life. Because she was black, she was supposed to have overcome the fears that plague visitors to the inner city. But she hadn't. The fear of attack and injury caused her the same kind of anxiety that a White person would feel. And the obvious reason is that she is a person who happens to be black.

I'm sure you will have no trouble at all understanding that. The mystery is that we didn't think she would be afraid. Once you begin to work among us, I think the mystery will be solved. While it is true that the black person is essentially no different from a white person, it is also true that his black characteristics are highly visible to persons living in a white culture. The very color of his skin tends to overemphasize the differences. For example, if an Italian walks into the Pizza Hut, no one suspects that his Italian background led him to pizza, because there's nothing visible to indicate to most Americans that he is Italian. On the other hand if a black woman comes out of a grocery store in January with a large piece of watermelon, the white mind immediately regards this as a racial characteristic, and the myth that blacks are overly partial to watermelon is reinforced. It doesn't even occur to the white mind that the woman may have a special urge for watermelon in January because she is expecting a baby. I really suspect that some race-conscious blacks do not buy watermelon in the presence of whites because they detest the white thinking that automatically occurs at the sight of a black with a watermelon.

Of I've chosen a neutral example. Nothing wrong with eating watermelon. But unfortunately the same principle applies in areas that are far more sensitive. We see a picture of a black criminal. Add to that the cold statistics that crime rates are high in black ghettos. Thus to us the black stranger is immediately associated with the black criminal. Again it wouldn't work that way with the Italian, no matter how many times you saw "The Godfather." Even if the Movie had given you a very low image of Italians, you could be held up on the street by one and still not know you'd been robbed by an Italian, simply because the physical appearance does not immediately identify the Italian people. Therefore, when a black person does something wrong, in the minds of many whites, the whole race is responsible. But when a white person does something wrong, that's an individual matter. We might cast some of the blame on his mother and father, but that's as far as it goes. Did you feel responsible when Richard Speck murdered eight nurses in Chicago? Neither did I. He was white and so are we, but that had nothing to do with it. Yet if a black man had done that, many would have thought that race had something to do with it. And many would have added that to their reasons for fearing and hating blacks. The point is simply this. The high visibility of black persons blows race completely out of proportion. While the black person is still a person, his blackness is very influential in the minds of others and in the minds of some blacks, so that the reaction is completely reversed.

You and I need to know and respect the race. A black man has the right to be proud of his culture, just as I am proud of some of the things that Germans have done. And we need to respect that right. But in your dealings with black persons, you are not basically dealing with a black. Basically you are dealing with a person with just a whole lot of feelings and emotions and desires and fear and guilts that have nothing to do with race. As fellow Christians we need to see the person, not just the face, and we need to deal with the person, recognizing race only when respect and honesty require it.

Point Two—Getting to Know Him

There all kinds of experts on the black race. From the white bigot to the black militant, a lot of people are ready to tell you with great authority what black people want and what black people are like.

These self-proclaimed experts have assumed entirely too much for themselves. The white bigot obviously doesn't know what he's talking about because he's never enjoyed the friendship of blacks. The black militant has some greater claim to authority in the matter, and yet it is a very limited authority. For he only knows his kind of black. He only thinks he knows what other blacks are thinking. There are many blacks whose thinking resembles yours more closely than it resembles the thinking of the militant.

Remember what I said in Point One. Blacks are persons, and no two persons are identical. I remember overbearing a black who sounded just like Barry Goldwater in what he said. Somebody like Malcom X would have turned this man off completely. Now this black Goldwater may not represent a large percentage of blacks.

But that's just the point. Any individual black is his own person. And for his own reasons, he can belong to any group of blacks that he wants to belong to. You simply cannot know what a black person is like until you talk to him and learn to know him, no matter how many blacks you may know, no matter how black you may be.

Would you be qualified to render a definitive statement on the attitude of whites toward marriage? It's just as ridiculous for anyone to speak for the whole black race.

In some of the later paragraphs, I'm going to try the ridiculous, to tell you some of the characteristics of the black race. But please realize that I'm really not that naive. I know that any individual black may be the exact opposite of his race in any given point. Even after you know all the typical black attitudes and characteristics, you don't know if your black acquaintance has those attitudes and characteristics, until you're really acquainted with him. Still you should know about those qualities in order to avoid offending a person who just may be sensitive about a given point. You know, not every woman is sensitive about her age. But if you want to work harmoniously with a woman, you don't go telling everyone how old she is. Likewise, the black person sitting across from you may not care in the least if you call him "colored." But because there are some who would resent it, "colored" is a word you just don't use for members of the black race.

I suppose I was pretty ignorant of racial characteristics when I first came to Milwaukee. I came with the attitude I had learned from Scripture. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" and "We are all one by faith in Christ Jesus." Since I had lived at a great distance from blacks up to that time, I had nothing else to go on. And therefore I assumed that under the skin we were exactly the same.

But I began to learn that this wasn't quite true. I read a couple books on the subject, and I began to notice black tendencies that I had not learned to expect from whites. I began to realize that some blacks are very proud of the racial characteristics and want to be recognized as different in some respects. I recognized the existence of a black culture, and formed my opinions of what that culture is, based on my experience with that culture.

I learned that we are not all alike under the skin, that some blacks react in a way I did not expect, for reasons I did not understand. And I suppose that many other whites, experience something similar as they get acquainted with black people.

But this is the crucial point. Sooner or later you must realize that the black culture is essentially different from your own. Now what do you do about it? Do you let this difference become an obstacle in your personal relationships with blacks? Or do you simply recognize and respect the difference, and learn to live with it without letting it interfere? For a called ambassador of Christ, of course it must be the latter.

One of my best friends in college had no interest at all in the athletic activities which were very important to me. Another close friend was not the least bit interested in classical music. But we enjoyed each other for the things we did have in common. And we did not insist on sharing everything that we enjoyed.

And now I think that my relationship with blacks is very much like that. I am not a part of their culture. I can respect it and enjoy it, but only as an outsider. We do not have culture in common. But as fellow human beings, and more especially as fellow Christians we have so many other things in common that there's no real difficulty in building a close, personal relationship. In other words, we are different, but it doesn't make any difference, because we are all one in Christ.

Again this brings out the fact that your chief asset in working with blacks is your new nature as a reborn child of God. Anything you could learn from books about blacks would only emphasize the differences. Your sinful nature would see these differences as barriers, and the more you learned, the more obstacles would appear. But through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit we have learned to care about people regardless of their character. Jesus loved them all and died for them. Thus all people become our real concern, no matter how different they may be. What you have learned from Christ will aid you in your relationship with blacks, far more than anything you can learn from books.

Point Three—What is the "Black Culture"?

There is no question that a black culture exists. But there is some difficulty in describing it. Any culture has characteristics which will inevitably seem inferior to the outsider, and therefore it is difficult to speak

frankly about such qualities without offending those who live within that culture. Even though they may not be ashamed of that quality, they resent the attitude of the outsider who sees that quality as inferior. The other difficulty in describing culture is that which I've already mentioned several times. No one living within that culture exactly fits the cultural stereotype. And anyone will resent being judged by a stereotype, even if the stereotype fits him exactly.

Thus it is essential to realize that a description of a culture is not a description of a person. It is more like a description of the house in which that person lives. Some people are shallow enough to make a judgement based on the house alone. The wiser ones will realize that although the house is some reflection of the person living in it, the real nature of that person cannot be known by his house alone. So also in my description of the black culture, I am not trying to tell you what he is. I'm only trying to tell you on the basis of my limited experience where he lives, or what may influence his ideas and attitudes.

To understand the black culture, it helps to know something about black history. And there the dominant theme is "slavery." Throughout its history our nation has suffered much through this basically evil institution. But no one has suffered more than the black. For 300 years the white man was master and the black man was slave. The impression of white superiority was firmly implanted in the minds of both races. And that erroneous impression had a way of making itself come true. If you are made to believe that you are inferior, then you lose a certain amount of self-respect. You lower your goal. And you end up on a lower level where essentially you don't belong.

The recent emphasis on black history is uncovering delightful examples of black persons who were strong enough to rise above the deadening impressions of slavery. But these impressions have certainly left a mark upon the black culture, and have made life more difficult for the people living within it.

Of course, slavery has been gone for more than a hundred years. Why haven't black people completely recovered from its influence?

There are a number of reasons for this, and in my own mind, the most important is this: A man's most influential teachers are his parents. Only in the case of exceptional ability does a man rise above the level of his father. It probably happens mores often that a man fails to achieve his father's stature. Therefore if your great-grandfather was the product of eight generations of slavery, he may have had a very low opinion of himself. And some of that very likely rubbed off on your grandfather, and on your father, and on you. In the meantime, your family would have experienced many other influences, but it would be not at all surprising if pronounced inferiority feelings remained.

Furthermore we don't even have to go back to the Civil War to find these impressions of inferiority being forced upon the black American. During our lifetime blacks were prevented by law from enjoying the same rights as the whites in the southern states. Those who came north found the poverty of the ghetto waiting for them. You may find this hard to believe (as I did), but before 1965, and possibly after, some of our Black Lutherans were turned away from our WELS churches. They were told to go to the all black church that "we" had provided for "them." We didn't want to keep them out of the Kingdom of God. We just didn't want them in our churches.

Thank God this has changed, largely through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. Today our Lutheran bigots have to crawl into the woodwork, or run to an all-white congregation when the black Christian comes along. But many of our black Lutherans can remember the day when they would not have been welcome in our churches. And human nature must react to such rejection. Either you resent it in anger, and maybe fight against it, or you humbly accept it as a result of your supposed inborn inferiority. Our society has probably been more guilty in this matter than our church. But the results of this treatment are certainly a part of the black culture.

Even today the mature black Christian realizes that it's not enough to match the abilities of a given white competitor. In order to get where the white man is, he has to be better than the white man. And taking all things into consideration, I believe this is still true. I have a great deal of admiration for the black who accepts this as a challenge. It takes a real man to do it. And I can understand if a black who is not that strong simply accepts the

role that society has made for him, and falls into his designated inferior position, or seeks revenge upon the society that has forced him there.

I'm not saying this to justify any black man's crimes against society. Sin is sin and guilt is guilt, whether it comes from the privileged or from the underprivileged. But I want you to understand that most backs have to work harder than you do, to gain the same accomplishments, not because blacks are inferior, but because of the role of inferiority that society has created for them.

Besides the impressions of inferiority that slavery laid upon the black race, there is another remnant of slavery that affects the black culture today, and that is the "matriarchal system." According to the social theories I have heard about, the slave family revolved about the mother. Father was out in the fields most of the time. At any time he could be sold and separated permanently from his family. If Mother was sold, the children very often went with her. If she became a house slave, she sometimes gained a great deal of influence in the master's family. Thus in slavery, the black mother had to provide whatever stability the black family could enjoy.

Even after slavery was abolished, society had little to offer the black man in the way of profitable occupation. The black woman could often obtain more regular and respectable employment than the man. And with the stability and self-respect she had earned on the plantation, she was in many cases better equipped to handle that kind of job.

Today the situation has changed, but only to a degree. The black man, if he is willing to work harder than his white colleague, can achieve positions of influence and prosperity. But the impressions of inferiority mentioned earlier make it harder for him to expect and attain those positions. When jobs are scarce, he is often the first to be laid off, both for practical reasons and from reasons of prejudice. But job openings are always available for women, especially in the custodial staffs of hospitals and nursing homes, because many black women are willing to do work that many whites would not consider. Even in welfare cases, the black woman with children is eligible for benefits that the man cannot receive. In fact, in some cases an unemployed black might better abandon his family so that they can receive aid from the county.

As a result, often the black man is not the provider upon whom the family depends. Deprived of that role, he may lose self-respect and the desire to be a good father to his family. In too many cases, the eventual responsibility falls upon the mother, so often that the black society has been described as a "matriarchal society," because the leadership role must so often be assumed by the mother.

(I know you get tired of hearing me say this, but I feel it has to be said, because it's so hard to keep your perspective in these matters. Don't think now that you can walk into a black home and assume that Mom is running the house. There are many black homes where Dad has met the challenge and earned the respect and stability that is simply granted to most white fathers. But at the same time remember that if a black man is not fulfilling his role as father and provider, he had a lot more to overcome than you or I did.)

A third factor that affects the black culture is the ghetto:

In the first place a ghetto is not necessarily a place of crime and poverty. A ghetto is simply a place where people of a unique culture gather together. Years ago certain areas of Milwaukee could properly have been termed German ghettos, because people who spoke German gathered in those neighborhoods and practiced there their German customs. But as these Germans began to use the public schools, and lost their language barriers, they generally infiltrated the rest of the community, and the ghetto disappeared.

And so it was with the Irish and French and Italians. After time eroded the language barrier, the culture disappeared from public view, and the ghetto evaporated.

Time will eventually erase most language barriers. But it doesn't affect color in the least. Even the children of an inter-racial marriage tend to show black characteristics that are highly visible. Thus the black ghetto does not disappear like the German or Irish ghetto. A combination of prejudice and preference tend to keep black people living together, separate from the rest of the community, and this intensifies the development and preservation of the black culture.

The other factor that is significant in the development of the black culture is an outgrowth of the other three, and that is poverty. Today as a group the black race is stronger financially than ever before. The healthy economy of the '60's and early '70's.made it easier for blacks to obtain good-paying jobs. The Civil Rights Movement forced employers to hire more blacks. Thus, many blacks today enjoy a much higher standard of living than their parents did.

But the poverty that was forced upon parents and grandparents has left its mark upon the culture. The necessities imposed by poverty become habits that remain even after the poverty is eliminated. So, for example, it was never necessary to manage large amounts of money in the poverty of the ghetto. Then if a person suddenly has a lot more money than he's ever had before, it's not surprising if he hasn't learned how to make good use, of it.

The results of poverty show up in the dietary habits of some blacks. A preference for "greens" (meaning the tops of beets or turnips) developed when this source of nourishment despised by whites was the only vegetable that many blacks could afford.

The humiliating effects of slavery, the development of the matriarchal system, the isolation of the ghetto, and the long years of poverty have all left their mark upon the black culture. But what is that black culture?

To whites it is perhaps most apparent in some of the externals, such as dress and automobiles. Sharp and colorful clothing is very noticeable, especially among younger blacks. Styles that we might consider outlandish are worn with a great deal of pride, and with considerable taste. It's no coincidence that styles popular among blacks later are adopted by the white community. Distinctive models of Buicks, Cadillacs, and some Lincolns are common in black neighborhoods, and not just ordinary Cadillacs. Many are dressed up with exterior and interior decorations that make this automobile the only one of its kind in town.

The love for bright colors and late fashions also appears in many black homes. Of course, the family living on welfare has to use whatever they can get. But where money is available, the interior of the home is often lavishly decorated with beautiful furniture and accessories. And this home may be on a block with houses that are in various stages of decay. The outside gives the impression of cold and poverty. Inside there is an atmosphere of warmth and comfort, even luxury. It should also be mentioned that many of these homes are kept so well by women who often hold down a job and even take classes at a local university in their "spare" time.

These are just some of the externals which really tell you very little about the culture itself. A more important part of the culture a is the language. It is probably correct to speak of a black dialect. The isolation of the ghetto has made possible the development of a standard English among blacks that is not standard among whites. Usually it has been considered inferior English, but that's only because whites have set the standards. The dialect contains some variations of grammar which would be "wrong," according to the English textbook, but are nevertheless "correct" according to the English that is regularly spoken in the black community. As a result, the blacks who must communicate regularly with both races often end up speaking two distinct dialects, just as the pastors in Frankenmuth, Michigan, preached high German from the pulpit, and spoke something they called "Bayrisch" to their parishioners on the street.

Thus there is to a degree a language barrier between us and some blacks. It seems to me that they can always understand me, but often I have difficulty understanding them. And if two blacks are talking together without trying to make you understand, they might use such heavy slang that you wouldn't have the slightest idea what they were talking about.

But keep in mind that most blacks use one dialect as easily as the other. It's not necessary for you to use the dialect to communicate. In fact I think a white who tried to talk the black dialect would immediately come across like a phony. On the other hand, in your efforts to know your black brother better, you'll also try to learn the dialect, not to speak it, but to understand it, so that you can also communicate with those who have never learned the white dialect very well. For the sake of your own attitudes in this matter, you should keep in mind that the black dialect is unique, not inferior.

As one who lives essentially outside of the black culture, I realize that there are many other features that could be included in a description of it. But since I am an outsider I have not observed these features often enough to describe them to you. I have not gone around with a tape recorder interviewing dozens of people in an effort to discover the black culture completely. I'm relying only upon my limited experience and reading on the subject. Thus I'm sure that much could be added to this brief description of the black culture.

I've gotten a taste of some of this particularly at the time of a black funeral in our church. The background music at the funeral home sounded to me like something from a roller skating rink. There was none of the pleasant conversation and occasional laughter heard at white funeral homes. The mourners simply sat in silent sympathy with the bereaved family. The final look at the body brought several women to the point of shrieking hysteria, the likes of which I had never seen before. And I was grateful to the black funeral director who gently assisted the wailing women away from the casket. There were members of the children's choir who were afraid to come to the funeral. After I saw what happened when the basket was closed, I understood the children's sentiments perfectly.

The outburst was not general. The spectacle was created by six or eight people out of over 200. Yet it seemed to me that this sort of outburst was expected, as if it wouldn't be showing proper respect if someone didn't break down in front of the casket. As an outsider, I don't really understand it. But I know that it's there, as a part of a culture that is decidedly different from my own.

It's at occasions such as funerals that cultural traits tend to show up. Whenever there is a social. occasion that primarily involves family, people do what appeals to them, without caring what others think. Thus most of my German culture lies dormant most of the time, except for private activities such as reading or music. About the only time we do anything in a "German way" is Christmas, when family traditions seem more pleasant and important.

Similarly the black culture may lie hidden from the outsider, especially when our contact is primarily with blacks who associate regularly with whites. This common tendency might lead some whites to deny the very existence of a black culture. But the culture is there, and becomes, very prominent in traditional social gatherings where the black man doesn't have to worry about what others might think.

Thus there is much about the black culture that you might never experience in ten years, even though your black associates live with it every day. Again, you don't have to know every detail of the black culture. You only need to respect it as a unique feature of a different race.

Culture in itself is amoral. Only a prejudiced eye would see anything wicked in black culture. However, there is much in black society that is immoral, but I prefer to designate this as environmental rather than cultural. It is a sad fact of life that the crime rate is high in the black community. It almost seems that a black teen-ager is expected by his peers to be arrested at least once before settling down to a straight life, if he ever settles down. That is probably an exaggeration from an outsider's point of view. Yet inner-city crime is common enough to inspire that impression.

While there are many good, stable-marriages in black communities, the fatherless home is common, much too common. I won't repeat what I said before about the adverse social conditions that society has heaped upon the black race. Here I just want to add that these social conditions make it even more difficult for a black marriage to survive. And as everyone knows, broken homes lead to broken homes, to undisciplined children, to inferior education and inferior employment and a host of other evils that influence inner-city life. It is not at all unusual that mothers hesitate to give the name of the father for a baptism certificate. A single household may include a bewildering array of family names, including the mother's maiden name, her first husband's name, her second husband's name, and the name of her latest boyfriend. If the child's name is Willie Jones, you can't always be sure that Willie's mother is Mrs. Jones, or that the man of the house is Willie's father. Since mother must earn the living and care for the house and get rest for her body, her children very often run the streets where education proceeds at an alarming rate. Children seem to get along well in spite of large difference in age, and of course the older ones are anxious to share their knowledge. On the parsonage steps one eight-year-old was arguing that you didn't have to be "growed" to have a baby, because he knew a girl that had one when she was only nine or ten.

But you probably know all you need to know about crime in the inner-city. I just want you to understand that the crime rate is not high because the people are black. Rather the fact is that Satan has created broad avenues for the sinful flesh in the inner city, and given such opportunities, the flesh will surely respond, no matter what color skin covers that flesh.

The black race does not have any unusual criminal tendencies. The higher crime rate in black communities is the result of environment. And just because the crime rate is so high, the black citizens of the inner city suffer at the hands of criminals more than their suburban counterparts.

The impression is often given that whites are victimized by blacks in the inner-city. And it is true that many elderly white people have been cruelly beaten by young blacks. But there is a very obvious reason for this. Criminals do not ordinarily pick the strongest targets. They prey upon the weak who cannot defend themselves or pursue. And because the elderly do not sell their homes as readily as others, there is a disproportionate number of elderly whites living in neighborhoods that include large numbers of undisciplined young blacks. The results are entirely predictable. On the other hand, a healthy white male is in no more danger than a healthy black male, simply because he can fight back.

In fact, the healthy white male is probably in less danger than his black counterpart, because he does not frequent the places where much inner-city violence begins or ends, namely the neighborhood tavern. What many people don't realize is that most victims of inner-city crime are blacks. Their homes are robbed more frequently because most inner-city homes are black.

Most inner-city murders are crimes of anger and vengeance committed by blacks against members of their own family. While the white person passing through the inner-city may hear some occasional verbal abuse, he is probably in no unusual danger, unless he is an elderly woman walking alone with a purse in her hand.

Point Four—Your Place in the Black Culture

You have a place in the black culture by virtue of your Call. God has placed you among these people to minister to their deepest spiritual needs. You cannot do this by remote control. You must be with them and among them. You must share their joys and their woes. But as you do this, there are several mistakes which you should be careful to avoid. The first is this: *Don't try to be black*. In same cases it is true that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. In this case imitation is more likely to come across as the crudest form of mockery. Blacks are used to living with two cultures, white and black. Thus they recognize the two cultures more quickly, and they know instantly when a white man is trying to act black. In the first place it's an insult, because he's probably presenting a clumsy imitation that tends to be ludicrous. In the second place it's hardly likely that a white in a white power structure wants to be black unless he wants something from the blacks. No matter how sincere the white Christian may be in trying to relate to his black brother, he comes across as a phony. Don't try to be black.

Don't try to be helpful. Some of the sharpest insults are delivered by people who are only trying to help. "Look at all the good we're doing for you. Doesn't that prove that we like you? Why don't you appreciate it more?" I admit that I get a little upset when someone tells me where to turn, when I know very well where I'm going. A black person can get much more upset when a white comes along trying to ram some helpfulness down his throat. First the white man takes away his right to be a man. Then he reaches down to help the black and expects him to be grateful. Many blacks bear such treatment in suffering silence. A black militant could get violently upset about it.

You and I didn't come to the inner-city to atone for the white man's sins against the black. We came because Jesus atones for all man's sins against God. And God has given us the privilege of delivering the good news of that atonement to our fellow sinners of the black race. If anyone should be grateful, you and I should be grateful for the privilege of serving Christ in such a special way. If anyone needs help, you and I need the help and understanding of our black brothers, as we try to be communicating the Gospel to them. So don't try to be helpful. Just be faithful to your Call.

Don't be a stereotypist. I've said this before, but it's worth saying again. Don't make any black responsible for some black characteristic until you know that he deserves it. The classic example is the white

who invites the black neighbor to dinner and serves him chitterlings. Of course, the white man only wanted to please. But in effect he said, "Welcome, Black Face. See how I have gone to much trouble to serve what you people eat." Instantly the black man knew he was not a guest, but a curiosity. The white man was gathering stories to tell and maybe laugh about as soon as he got back to his white brothers. The black man only wants to be treated as a person, not as an ambassador from a foreign country. Therefore respect his culture, but treat him as a man.

Personally I have great difficulty knowing when to speak of race with blacks. Unless I know my company very well, and I don't know much black company that well, I can never be sure that my words will come out the way I mean them to come out. Because white men so often speak of blacks in derogatory terms, my words will almost certainly sound derogatory if I make any reference to race at all. Blacks can speak of these things with no danger of offense. They can even joke about it. But if I make the same joke, the laughter is sure to be forced. Therefore, in conversations with blacks, it is almost always bettor to avoid reference to race.

One teacher really blew it. He was discussing his discipline problems with a black parent. He said, "You know how these children are." To him it sounded like a simple statement of fact. But she heard him say, "These children are black, and because they're black, they're ill-behaved." Is it any wonder that this mother didn't expect her child would receive a fair share of that teacher's attention and kindness?

There's a little game we play that's related to our inner-city work. It's called, "Catch the racist." We simply try to catch each other saying things that could be offensive to blacks. And when it happens we say, "That's a racist statement."

After a few years of inner-city living, we notice the racist statements quite readily. "Black people really have a sense of rhythm" is a racist statement. Many do. Many don't. No black wants to be stereotyped as a rhythmic person, even if you mean it as a compliment.

I could give you a hundred more examples that wouldn't mean a thing to you now. Just be alert. Among whites, never speak negatively of the black race. Among blacks, never speak of race at all.

Again, when you deal directly with blacks, treat them as persons, not as blacks: Don't be a stereotypist.

Always say black. That is the simplest rule in this book. When a white man says "nigger," it has always been the sharpest kind of insult to a black man. So our children say "catch a tiger by the toe" and no one talks about catching anything in the woodpile. "Negro" is a technical term for the race. But it bears the onus of the age in which it was popular: Similarly the word "colored" was once an accepted term. But today it reminds black people of the days when they were expected to know their place and remain humble and submissive in the presence of whites.

Different blacks may use all three terms without offense, depending on their individual personality. But white people had better say "black." It's the accepted term that carries the least risk of offense. "Afro-American" is also desired by some blacks, but the very number of syllables makes it unlikely that the term will ever become popular.

"Boy" is another word that whites should avoid using around blacks. There was a time when a black man was called "boy" even though he was forty years old. You and I may never have used it that way, or heard it used. But to the black man or teenagers, "boy" is an insult. That's the reason why "man" is such a popular expression among blacks. So you and I should say "man," not "boy," even if the boy is ten yearsold.

Remember that Black is Beautiful. This matter of terminology takes a strange twist in our dealings with blacks. Only in the last few years has the word "black," been used for the Negro race. Prior to that time the word was not directly associated with the race. Rather it was the name of a color that was sometimes used to represent something evil or unpleasant. Black was the color of death. The cloud of gloom over a person's head was always black. On Luther's seal the cross was black to represent man's sin. Similarly white was the color of goodness and purity. The old westerns always had the "good guys" in the white hats. And this color symbolism has left its imprint upon our speech, without intending any racial implications whatsoever.

However, the fact is that in today's society white means Caucasian and black means Negro. Thus if we continue to use black to represent the evil and white to represent the good, we run the risk of offending many blacks.

Therefore I have taken pains to note those hymns which use the word "black" in a negative sense, and we avoid using them in our worship services.

Similarly we don't use number 279 which includes the prayer that God would "make us white today."

Its also interesting to note that to my knowledge Scripture itself does not use the word "black" to represent evil. According to Isaiah our sins are as "red" as scarlet. Now that might cause some problems for Christians working in an Indian culture. But it demonstrates that we don't have to use "black" to represent evil.

Keep your hands off. This mistake is most often made by teachers in the classroom. They lay a friendly hand on the shoulder. They seize a child by both arms when they really want his attention. The effect is usually the opposite. The child may be so upset at being handled that he can't hear a word the teacher is saying.

I can't give a logical reason for this. It may be related to the habit of using hands in anger that many blacks live with daily. In the inner-city anger is rarely expressed quietly. There is instant shouting and blows follow almost immediately both on the playground and in the home. Teachers must constantly be alert to prevent fistfights, even in the classroom.

Since hands are often used in anger; the touch of a teacher's hand may mean to the black child that the teacher is angry, even when he is not. Therefore we avoid offending children by touching them. And the older the child, the greater the offense.

There may be times when a teacher must use hands, to break up a fight, or even to spank a very young child. But these are extremes when the use of hands is appropriate. Otherwise a Christian leader must make his point verbally, without the laying on of hands.

These are some of the rules that whites should follow in working with blacks. But remember that following these rules will not insure good relationships with blacks. Many blacks will not even notice if you break the rules. Many will notice but ignore it as the sort of thing they expect from whites who are unaware. (The black lady did not seem to be offended at all when her elderly white neighbor told me in her presence that she was a good person in spite of her blackness, because "she had a white heart.") These are rules we follow out of respect and consideration for our black brothers and sisters in Christ. But without that respect and consideration, correct behavior means little or nothing at all. Genuine Christian love and concern are still the most important assets in working with people of the black race.

Point Five—Prejudice as a Fact of Life

A simple definition of prejudice lies in the word itself. It is "pre-judging," that is, judging a person on the basis of some external, without really knowing what the person is like. It is not limited to racial matters. When a man comes to my office unshaven and smelling of alcohol I do some instant pre-judging that will affect my dealings with him. My judgment may be wrong, but for the moment it's all I have to go an. And as long as I don't place too much confidence in my judgment, it's not really a bad procedure.

The same kind of prejudging goes on between the races. And essentially it goes like this. Whites in general have a low opinion of blacks. Thus when Mr. White meets Mr. Black, he regards him as an inferior person. Mr. Black, on the other hand, knows what whites think of blacks, and he resents Mr. White's attitude. All this goes on before either says a word to the other. Both judgments may be entirely false. Both mad be happy to learn their initial judgment was false. But the pre-judging takes place anyway, and I believe it happens to a greater or lesser degree in all of us.

To the extent that this pre-judging is negative, and it usually is, it is a symptom of the sinful flesh in each of us. The Christian will recognize this and stifle his negative prejudice. But we have no control over the prejudice of others, except as we can modify it by the power of the Spirit through the teaching of His Word. And prejudice in its more ugly forms does exist in our congregations. There are Christians who may worship and serve their God otherwise, who have not yet learned to receive all men as brothers. These may want to deny membership to black Christians, and failing in this they will leave the congregation. There are others who love their church too much to leave it. They will tolerate the presence of blacks, but nothing more than this. The black Christians are not oblivious to what's going on around them, and they resent it. They are hurt by it.

However, since they are Christians, both blacks and whites, they know their attitudes are indefensible in the light of God's Word, and they will generally keep quiet about it. Thus it would be foolish to permit a situation that would bring this hidden sin out into the open. I'm thinking primarily of the congregational resolution that declares this church open to blacks. To offer such a resolution is to invite debate on it. And such debate will inevitably bring this prejudice to the surface. Therefore it is wise to avoid any public discussion of racial matters. After all, Jesus said, "Preach the Gospel to every creature." After that, nothing more needs to be said.

So don't be so naive that you think the evil of prejudice is absent, just because it doesn't appear on the surface. Rather try to avoid situations that encourage the expression of prejudiced opinions. For in the church nothing good can come from expressions of negative racial opinions, unless the Lord intends to destroy a church so He can rebuild it again.

Point Six—The Future of Black Lutheranism

Obviously what is written on these pages is the opinion of the author, and therefore its value is quite limited. But as one who is called to help build the Lutheran church among blacks, you need to give this matter some serious thought. Perhaps some of my ideas on the matter will help to stimulate your thinking.

In the first place, the Lutheran church is by no means established in the black community, at least not in our Wisconsin Synod. At present I would estimate the total number of confirmed blacks in our Synod to be around 700 communicants scattered around a dozen congregations. However, with the exception of St. Philip's in Milwaukee, and Zoar in Detroit, all of these congregations are primarily white congregations, with white leadership, white financial support, and a white clergy. And in most cases these congregations are going downhill in membership and financial strength. What will happen. when the remaining whites are called Home, or transfer to other congregations? How can a few black families maintain facilities and a ministry that once served a thousand or more communicants?

Our problem is not unlike that of our word mission fields. In fact, as I read Pastor Wendland's book, "To Africa With Love," I was amazed to learn how many of his problems matched those of the inner-city, not because we are both dealing with blacks, but we are both trying to build a church in one culture, while we ourselves live in another.

In order to survive in the black community, the Lutheran church must become indigenous, that is, it must be able to support itself with staff and money. I could wish it were otherwise. I have a special joy in serving an integrated church in which we demonstrate that we are all one in Christ. But until most blacks are willing to live in a white neighborhood, and until most whites are willing to live in a black neighborhood, segregation will be a way of life, like it or not. Eventually our integrated churches will become all black, or they will disintegrate, leaving our black Lutherans in the neighborhood without a church home. Therefore there is an obvious need for an indigenous Lutheran church in the black community.

This requires in the first place 'a black Lutheran clergy. This is not because our black Lutherans resent a white pastor or teacher. They have received him and loved him perhaps more than many white congregations would. And they don't want a black man thrust upon them, just because he happens to be black. They want a solid, Scriptural spiritual leader.

On the other hand color does make a difference to the unregenerate. When there is no Christian love to stifle prejudice, the unchurched black will not receive a white pastor without questioning his motives and sincerity. Besides this, every congregation should be offering young men and women for the ministry as a normal part of their Christian mission on earth. If our black congregations are not doing this, they are neglecting an important part of their calling.

Finally there are many white pastors and teachers who do not have the ability to work among people of another culture. This is not a criticism of their Christian character. It is simply the lack of a gift that is not given to everyone. And realizing this, pastors and teachers have declined calls to inner-city congregations with distressing regularity. There may be many pastors and teachers who are equipped to work across cultures, but

they may not be free to leave their present calling, or they may not be called to that kind of ministry. In order to fill our inner-city pulpits and classrooms, we need black pastors and teachers.

Why then don't we have them? The question is too complex to be answered in this letter. But the biggest reason is that the "job prospects" fire by no means visible to a young black. When he sees that every Lutheran pastor and teacher is white, he sees no place for himself in that picture. And if he thinks any more about it, which he probably does not, he may rightly wonder which of those dozen or so congregations will be able and willing to give him a call when he is ready for the ministry. It is not lack of ability that has kept blacks out of the ministry. It is rather the lack of a receptive atmosphere to encourage such aspirations.

We want our black fellow Christians to take a responsible part in the work and leadership of our church, but we realize that it cannot be quickly or easily achieved. Unless some come to us from other churches for confessional reasons, we are not likely to have black pastors or teachers for another ten years. The course of study itself requires four to twelve years, and I don't know of any blacks who are presently in our pastor-teacher training colleges. Furthermore the black attending New Ulm or Watertown is completely removed from his culture, and that can make his life very uncomfortable, even if his classmates and faculty accept him warmly.

Realizing this, the Synod has made provision for training older black men for the ministry, making use of opportunities provided in the Milwaukee area. But this avenue has not created any immediate prospects for a black ministry either. It took three years to prepare the program, and in the two years that the door has been opened, no one has yet dared to venture through it.

As always your Call includes the responsibility to encourage your people to prepare themselves to fill your place when you must leave. Therefore you should understand the importance of that responsibility, and the difficulty involved in fulfilling it.

At this point in history we cannot say what the future of black Lutheranism in the Wisconsin Synod will be. But we know that we must make every effort to assure that future.

Conclusion—Your Future in the Service of an Inner-city Church

If you have taken the trouble to read this far, you may have gotten a better picture of the work that lies before you, and the unique challenges of that work. I hope that this clearer picture has in no way increased your apprehension about your Call. I did not want to do that. Rather I wanted to relieve some apprehension by giving you a better understanding of your work. It is true that you can make mistakes in your ministry that would not be mistakes elsewhere. But it is also true that you have a divine Call to serve in this ministry. God has made you, not someone else, responsible for your Call, and He does not give such a Call without also granting the ability to serve that calling. Therefore you will want to serve that ministry to the best of your ability, preparing yourself in every possible way. If this letter has helped somewhat to prepare you for this ministry, your time and mine will not have been wasted.

May God bless your ministry richly,

Rev. Rolfe F. Westendorf
Siloah Lutheran Church
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
July 2, 1975

Suggested reading:
Crisis in Black and White – Silbermann
To Africa with Love – Wendland
Autobiography of Malcom X