Nebraska Synod ELCA

One Church, BETTER TOGETHER

A Time for Burning

Leader's Study Guide

This study was created by a Nebraska Synod (ELCA) committee dedicated to R.A.R.E. (Racial Awareness, Reconciliation, and Engagement).

Introduction:

This leader's guide is intended to facilitate the complex and challenging conversations that arise from discussions of race in general and the film, A Time for Burning*, in particular. Listed below are suggestions for how to structure the study and navigate some of these challenging conversations. In preparation for the study, you may want to explore the resources related to racism and the church found on the Nebraska Synod website: http://nebraskasynod.org/congregations/worship/rare-resources.html You may also wish to add questions that are relevant to your congregation and community.*

Since congregations will vary in their available time and investment in the study, several models for exploring A Time for Burning *are provided:*

1) One Session:

> *A three-hour workshop, perhaps with lunch or dinner provided: Watch film (one hour), record reactions (15 minutes), break or lunch (15-30 minutes), discuss Sections II and III (one hour), and discuss Section IV (30 minutes).*

2) Two Sessions:

> *Day One – Watch film and have homework to record general reactions/questions as well as responses to Section II questions.*
>
> *Day Two – Discuss responses and explore Sections III and IV. (You may wish to have the film available to re-watch particular sections).*

3) Three Sessions:

> *Day One – Watch film and ask participants to record reactions and questions.*
>
> *Day Two – Jump right into Section III. Ask for the responses people wrote.*
>
> *Day Three – Look at the timeline of the Civil Rights Movement and consider the context of the film. Focus on how the film relates to our time. Discuss Section II questions. Be prepared to re-watch selected sections. Discuss the Section IV questions on next steps.*

Conversations about race and racism are often charged with awkwardness, resentment, and even ignorance about basic historical realities. In an effort to make your conversations productive, here are some tips for navigating difficult terrain:

- *Begin with a prayer asking that your group be granted a thoughtful conversation that includes respect for differences and reveals your care for one another.*

- *Embrace (or at least accept) awkwardness. Many people avoid conversations about race because they fear making a misstep or offending someone. Make sure your group understands that they are in a safe environment where communication and advancement of understanding are the priorities.*

- *Place the concept of race into the context of different types of diversity: age, economic status, educational background, religious perspective, sexual orientation, AND diversity of opinion. We are enriched through this diversity and we learn from it. When members understand that they are already a part of a community with different types of diversity, they may be more open to the conversation about racial diversity.*

- *If you have a large group or are nervous about opposing voices in the room, begin with some ground rules. You might ask that only one person speak at a time and that participants be given the opportunity to complete their thoughts. If the conversation gets heated, prepare participants to take a moment to ask what they have in common. You know what ground rules, if any, would be appropriate for your group.*

Finally, thank you for taking on the challenge of improving racial understanding and combating racism through this study! If you find the study useful, please encourage leaders of other congregations to use it.

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Study Guide

This study was created by a Nebraska Synod (ELCA) committee dedicated to R.A.R.E. (Racial Awareness, Reconciliation, and Engagement).

Purpose:

This study guide is intended to generate awareness, encourage reconciliation, and prompt engagement so that we can live out the command to love God and love our neighbors. As Lutherans we profess that the diversity of the human creation is a gift that allows us to see the breadth and beauty of God's work. We acknowledge that racism is a sin that turns us inward, toward the people we believe to most resemble us, and against the people we imagine to be the most different. Through grace we commit to the task of shedding our prejudices and participating in the rich blessing of human difference.

Approach:

Conversations about race can be awkward and uncomfortable. As people with a shared faith, we dedicate ourselves to the free exchange of ideas and to respect for each other as people who are growing in different ways and at different speeds. We come from many different backgrounds, and very different experiences have shaped us; yet we hold in common a sinful nature and the free gift of forgiveness of those sins. We move forward in the knowledge that God has given us much more to bring us together than to divide us.

Background:

Many people enter discussions of race with the mistaken belief that it is a scientific classification to account for difference. In fact, the notion of race – as it relates to differences in skin tone or physical features – is a cultural invention, and a fairly recent one. Many scholars point to the middle of the 1600s in the colonies of North America as the point at which the modern idea of race was developed as an idea to keep some people enslaved and oppressed and others in positions of power. Throughout this study, it will be important to keep in mind the idea that race is an invention and to consider how that invention has operated in history, particularly the time period (1968) when *A Time for Burning* was released.

I. Watch the film (1 hour). You might want to have a paper and pen or an electronic device available to record questions and reactions as you watch.

II. General Questions:

a) What were your general thoughts and feelings as you watched the film?

b) 2018 marks the 50th anniversary of *A Time for Burning* being nominated for an Academy Award. Did the film feel familiar or foreign, outdated or timely?

> *Leader Notes: Some people will feel that the world of the film, in which having dinner with people of another race is controversial, is strange and far off. Others will feel that the film identifies the precise issues that we are dealing with today. Some combination of those perspectives is common. Getting participants to point to examples of how the current climate is similar or different can provide a good starting point for understanding the various perspectives in the group.*

c) 2018 is also the anniversary of the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. What facts do you know about the Civil Rights movement that puts the film into context? (See timeline: https://www.washingtonpost.com/apps/g/page/local/timeline-the-civil-rights-era/401/).

> *Leader Notes: A brief overview of major events of the Civil Rights Movement, both before and after the film was made, can highlight the volatility of the time period and place many of the characters' emotions in context. Reviewing major events in the recent history of race relations can reinforce the tension between progress and the persistent challenges of racism in our time. The timeline above is extensive, so you might choose to limit your discussion to the events of 1967 and 1968. Sending out the link to participants in advance of the study might provide greater depth to the conversation.*

d) This film can be hard to watch. What scene(s) bothered you the most? Why?

> *Leader Notes: The "why" is the most important part of this question. If participants are uncomfortable with the comments by Ernie Chambers, they may feel that the core of their faith is being unfairly judged. If others squirm watching the unwillingness of the church council to take even modest steps toward racial reconciliation, they may feel implicated in the aversion to risk-taking that we sometimes experience today. Replaying particular scenes from the film can help participants to identify the sources of their uneasiness.*

e) How has your understanding of race been formed? How does your view fit with the idea that race is a social invention?

> *<u>Leader Notes</u>: Once members of your group understand that genetic differences between people typically assigned to racial categories are scientifically meaningless, it might be helpful to discuss how race operates as a cultural category. Why do people cling to it? You might also ask them what other categories of difference they utilize – consciously or unconsciously – when they interact with people. If they understand how we all evaluate others based on clothing or height or age, they might begin to move away from the idea that they are "color blind." We are all wired to see difference. It is what we do with those perceptions that is important.*

f) What is "racism," and in what ways does it work against the faith we profess? What do the following scripture passages and major tenets of Luther's theology suggest about racism?

- *"Have we all not one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?"* (Malachi 2:10 NRSV).
- *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13: 34-35 NRSV).
- *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28 NRSV).

Luther believed that we:

- Are justified by grace through faith alone.
- Participate in a universal priesthood of believers.
- Experience a paradox of freedom in which we are both "lord of all, subject to none" and "servant of all, subject to all."

III. Digging Deeper:

a) About five minutes into the film, Ernie Chambers suggests that racial unity is an impossible goal, and he particularly implicates the church in the country's racial divide. Why do you think he believes that?

b) Chambers also says, "As far as we're concerned, your Jesus is contaminated." How would you respond to that critique? In what sense is he right or wrong?

> *<u>Leader Notes</u>: While group members may balk at the idea of Jesus being "contaminated," it will be important to note that Chambers is arguing that the way white people are interpreting and using the idea of Jesus is contaminated.*

Placing his comment in the larger context of bad things done in the name of Jesus historically can at least clarify Chambers' perspective. How we respond to that critique and our own notion of what Jesus means is an important next step in the question.

c) What is at stake for each of the people involved? What internal or external obstacles do they face?

- Ernie Chambers
- Rev. Bill Youngdahl
- Ray Cristensen
- African-American clergy members in Omaha
- The Augustana Church Council

d) At one point Pastor Youngdahl asks, “What kind of attitudes are you sharing with others –your friends, your children – when it comes to race relations? What is your race-relations vocabulary?" What do we discover when we ask ourselves the same questions?

e) One of the fears expressed by the board members of Augustana is that they will lose members or even split the church by promoting racial equality. That fear leads some to conclude that the time is not right or that the risks are too great. Are these same fears present today? If so, how do we overcome them?

f) In your view, what was a success or failure in the film?

g) Despite the unflattering picture of Augustana Lutheran Church in *A Time for Burning,* this film was commissioned and released by the Lutheran Church. What do you think of that fact? What does it suggest about how the church can proceed in the promotion of racial reconciliation?

<u>Leader Notes</u>: Ideally this question will lead participants into the "Next Steps" section by inviting them to understand that being implicated in racial disunity does not mean that we cannot move forward. In fact, that the church has been complicit, or at least passive, in racism commands that we push forward with greater urgency.

IV. Next Steps:

a) How can your intellectual and emotional responses to the film lead to action? In other words, what are the next steps in developing your understanding and promotion of racial equality?

b) What can we do today to improve race relations within the Lutheran Church?

c) What are the next steps for your congregation in particular?

d) The ELCA is one of the "whitest" denominations in the country. How can we achieve greater diversity in the church?

> *Leader Notes: Responses to each of these questions will vary widely based upon the racial composition of the communities in which the study is used, the integration of those communities, communication between congregations, and other factors. If the group is motivated by the film and discussion, it will be important that they be creative in finding ways, even in simple gestures of education, worship, and service, to become more aware of racism and inclusive in their church lives. Those motivated to take next steps should consult the list of R.A.R.E. resources and feel free to contact members of the R.A.R.E. committee through the Nebraska Synod Office.*

This study was created by a Nebraska Synod committee dedicated to R.A.R.E. (Racial Awareness, Reconciliation, and Engagement). For a list of books, videos, podcasts and other resources related to racism and the church please visit the Nebraska Synod website: http://nebraskasynod.org/congregations/worship/rare-resources.html