

# The “forgotten” Luther & widening economic inequality

Lutheran Ethicists Network Gathering 2019

January 2 (evening) and 3 (full day)

At the Louisville Marriott Downtown, Louisville, KY

(Registration: <https://community.elca.org/online-registration/lutheran-ethics-gathering-2019>)

Hotel reservation at: <https://scethics.org/annual-meetings/all/2019-hotel-reservation>

This year’s Gathering will explore the mixed deposit of Lutheran social teaching on the stark, and growing, wealth and income inequality of the U.S. We also will explore what can be done. Join us!

## **WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 2**

5:00 -- Meet in lobby and walk to dinner out (optional)

7:30 – Welcome

7:45 – Session 1: Brief self-introductions; update from Theological Ethics Desk;  
Presentation: What is going on with income and wealth today in the U.S.?

8:45 – Devotions with Pr. Heather Apel (event chaplain)

9:15 – Hospitality Room (to be announced)

## **THURSDAY, JANUARY 3**

*7:45 Breakfast (if pre-ordered)*

8:30 Devotions

9:00 Session 2: Ryan Cumming “An Economy of Grace: Inequality and Lutheran Witness.”  
Respondent Donna R. Matteis

*10:30 Break*

10:45 Session 3: Jon Pahl "An Economic Reading of Luther on the Eucharist, or How Polemics over "Real Presence" Made Matter Matter in New Ways"  
Respondent Justin Nickel

*12:15 Lunch (if pre-ordered)*

1:00 Lutheran Ethicists’ Network meeting: next Gathering’s theme and other business.

*1:50 Stretch break*

2:00 Session 4: Cynthia Moe-Lobeda (by Zoom)  
Respondent Willa Lengyel

*3:30 Break*

3:45 Session 5: Panel: Bringing these concerns to life in the church and society.  
Moderator Richard Perry; panelist invitations pending

5:15 Devotions and closing

6:15 Meet to Walk to restaurant (optional)

8:45 Hospitality Room (to be announced)

## Program Description

Economic inequality is stark in the US. The top 10% receive 9 times the income of everyone else (the bottom 90%). The top .1% exceed by almost 200 times the income of the bottom 90%.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the trendlines are moving towards greater inequality. The share of income taken by the top 1% has doubled—from 10% to 22%—during the past thirty-five years, all while one-quarter of American workers make less than the minimum wage.<sup>2</sup> And the pain in the middle and bottom is not distributed equally. The gap in income between whites and blacks widened by \$10,000 (from \$19,000 to \$27,000) between 1967 and 2011 (as measured in constant 2012 dollars).<sup>3</sup>

What does the Lutheran tradition say to these disruptive trends? While Luther himself excoriated the greed of merchants and abuses by nobles, the Lutheran tradition generally has not echoed the thunderous Biblical indictments offered by Amos and other Hebrew prophets. Luther himself asserted the necessity of social inequality (Luther's Works 51:348, 26:97-98, 356). For Luther, social hierarchy and attendant inequality were desirable in earthly affairs, even while he asserted the radical egalitarianism of the Kingdom of God (24:155-6; see also his discussion of Galatians 2:6 for how he embraces this paradox [26:92-98])

What to do with this legacy? Clearly, Luther's own convictions must be retrieved critically—but how precisely? To what extent are we bound to Luther's vision? How might we reconcile Luther's social conservatism with the evidence of economic egalitarianism uncovered by our speakers? And more contemporaneously, does economic inequality have any redeeming features, as for Luther, or for us is it nothing more than a widening social plague? We know, for instance, that widening economic inequality destabilizes the basic egalitarian presuppositions of a democracy, for it embeds and reinforces other dimensions of social inequality. Are there effective efforts to address the trends?

Jon Pahl, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, and Ryan Cumming, three contributors to the recent book *The Forgotten Luther*, have been asked to extend their thinking toward what kind of retrieval of the Lutheran tradition is appropriate to address present trends. Three responses from young scholars and ample conversation among participants will follow. A panel of local practitioners whose work engage the problems round out a program that promises lively conversation about the mixed deposit of Lutheran teaching on the question of economic inequality.

## Presenters

**Ryan P. Cumming**, Ph.D., is the program director of hunger education for ELCA World Hunger. In this role, he develops educational resources for congregations to learn about hunger and poverty and effective faith-based responses to both. His is the author of *The African American Challenge to Just War Theory*, a contributor to *The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Social-Economic Witness of the Reformation*, and editor of the forthcoming *The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Church's Public Witness*. Previously, he has served as the interim editor of the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, a member of the ELCA's social statement task force on criminal justice, and as a co-planner for prior Lutheran Ethicists

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://inequality.org/facts/income-inequality/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thebalance.com/income-inequality-in-america-3306190>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/07/5-facts-about-economic-inequality/>

Gatherings. He also teaches religious perspectives on death and dying for Central Michigan University and recently relocated to Michigan to work remotely for the ELCA.

**Cynthia Moe-Lobeda**, Ph.D. has lectured or consulted in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, Australia, and North America in theology; ethics; and matters of climate justice and climate racism, moral agency, economic justice, eco-feminist theology, and faith-based resistance to systemic oppression. Her most recent book, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*, won the Nautilus Award for social justice. She is author or co-author of six volumes and numerous articles and chapters including a chapter in *The Forgotten Luther* entitled, "The Subversive Luther." Moe-Lobeda is Professor of Christian Ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and is on the Core Doctoral Faculty of the Graduate Theological Union. She holds a doctoral degree in Christian Ethics from Union Theological Seminary. The website for her most recent book is: <http://resistingstructuralevil.com/>

**Jon Pahl**, Ph.D. is the Peter Paul and Elizabeth Hagan Professor of the History of Christianity at The United Lutheran Seminary. He received his BA from Valparaiso University, MTS from Trinity Lutheran Seminary, and PhD from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Jon is the author of 7 books, most recently *Fethullah Gulen: A Life of Hizmet* [it's due to be published in September or October], which focuses in part of Gulen's economic teaching. Dr. Pahl is also the author of a chapter in *The Forgotten Luther* that undertakes an economic reading of Luther's Small Catechism. Jon lives with his wife, Lisa, in Clintonville, WI, where he also serves as Minister of Faith Formation and Community Engagement at Union Congregational United Church of Christ in Green Bay.

#### **Respondents**

**Donna Matteis** is a Ph.D. student at Drew University in New Jersey in Christian Social Ethics, with a particular interest in Lutheran political ethics. She serves as president of the ELCA's European Descent Association for Racial Justice. She has attended the University of Michigan, Wayne State University Law School and the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit.

**Justin Nickel** received his Ph.D. in 2018 from Princeton Theological Seminary. He is serving as pastor of Living God Lutheran Church in Honey Brook, PA. His dissertation uses Martin Luther's preaching as a resource for his moral theology. He has done adjunct work at United Lutheran Seminary and Princeton Theological Seminary.

**Willa Swenson-Lengyel** received her Ph.D. in religious ethics from the University of Chicago Divinity School in 2018. She currently is a Catherine of Siena Fellow at Villanova University. Her work focuses on questions regarding moral agency and hope in response to climate change.

#### **Panelists:**

Moderator: **Richard Perry** is a pastor of the ELCA and professor emeritus from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago where he taught social ethics and public church for many years. He also serves on the advisory committee of the Journal of Lutheran Ethics.

Other invitations to panelists are pending.

#### **Chaplain**

**Rev. Heather Apel** has been serving as an Assistant to the Bishop in the Indiana-Kentucky Synod since 2011. Her main areas of responsibility focus on the support and development of leadership within the IK Synod. Prior to this role that began in 2011, she served for 5 years as an associate pastor at Bethel Lutheran Church, Noblesville, IN.