



HEARTLAND CONFERENCE
ANTI-RACISM NETWORK

Congregational Discussion Guide

White Savior: Racism in the American Church

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Dear Users:

I created the following discussion guide for congregational use within the United Church of Christ. The aim of this guide is to support the efforts of congregational leaders from any tradition in their efforts to discuss and address racism as a people of faith. I have not obtained permission from 1517 Media, Sparkhouse, or Aaron J. Christopher to create this guide.

This film is rated 16+ and contains some explicit language and violent imagery. Please pay careful attention when preparing to screen and/or discuss this film.

Feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Faithfully Yours,

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White Savior: Racism and the American Church (2019)

Original Documentary By 1517 Media
A Sparkhouse Production
Directed by Aaron J. Christopher
Available on Amazon Prime, & Apple TV

THE OVERARCHING QUESTION

1. The documentary begins by stating the overarching questions of the film: "Can the issues of race ever be truly overcome? Is it just human nature to divide ourselves along racial lines?"

a. What do you make of this question?
How does it make you feel?

b. What, if anything, does this question have to do with Christianity?

c. Does this question offer a challenge for the Church in the 21st Century?

RACE IS SOMETHING WE MADE UP (1:20)

2. Prof. Debra L. Leigh characterizes a common response: "Racism is there, it's always going to be there, there's nothing you can do about it. You are the race you are." She then responds by saying, "No, this is something we made up."

a. Do you think Prof. Leigh's characterization—"there's nothing you can do about it"—is common among the Christians you know? What about your own congregation? Why?

b. Reflecting on her response—that racism is "something we made up"—do you sense that this is something understood among the Christians you know? Why or why not?

"THE STORY OF RACE IS THE STORY OF LABOR"
(1:47)

3. The narrator says, "Most of us were taught that North America was initially colonized by those seeking religious freedom. But in fact, most Europeans, including the Pilgrims, came for land and economic opportunity."

a. What difference does it make that religious freedom was not the only—or even primary—reason for the colonization of North America?

b. What difference does this make in terms of the self-understanding of our religious traditions?

c. Does this statement make a moral claim on white Christians in America?

THE DIVIDE AND CONQUER STRATEGY (2:35)

4. The narrator tells the story of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676: "Alarmed by the natural alliance between the indentured and the enslaved, the ruling class passed a series of laws that segregated and permanently enslaved those of African descent while also giving their European counterparts new rights and status. This divide and conquer strategy paved the way for what would become an organized system of racial chattel—slavery."

a. What are some ways we see this "divide and conquer strategy" still at work in American society?

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE (4:16)

5. Dr. Crystal Moten summarizes the history: "What humans have done is ascribe meaning and difference to skin colors and then use those meanings to create hierarchies. And so when we say race is socially constructed, it is about the ways in which humans have created hierarchies related to racial difference."

a. Was this part of the story of America included in your education growing up?

b. Have you heard the term "socially constructed" before? If so, when were you first exposed to it?

BAD THEOLOGY AND WHITE SUPREMACY (4:34)

6. The narrator explains, "The construct of race as a way to assign value to human beings became woven into the structures of this new nation with white people valued above all others. This ideology has been upheld and reinforced throughout our country's history, continually seeking legitimation through pseudo-science, civil policy, and bad theology, all examined through a white lens."

a. What are some ways religion in America has supported and continues to support racial hierarchies?

AFFIRMING WHITE SUPERIORITY (5:25)

7. Dr. Soong-Chan Rah explains his experience of walking into a denominational headquarters and seeing that all the important people of that denomination are all white men. "For the history of this denomination...they believe that the only important people are old white men. That implicitly is affirming or asserting white superiority."

a. Do you agree with Dr. Rah's statement?
Why or why not?

b. Does your church, institution, or denomination affirm or assert white superiority in similar ways?

GUILTY OF SUPPORTING THE SYSTEM (9:37)

8. The narrator makes an important claim:

"You and I did not start this system of race and white supremacy, but if we do not actively work at uncovering our own inherent bias and tearing down the system, we are guilty still of supporting it."

a. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

b. What are some clear examples of actively working to uncover and tear down white supremacy?

THE AMERICAN CHURCH AND AMERICAN CULTURE

9. The narrator begins the second chapter of the documentary with the statement: "We've been taught that the United States was founded on religious liberty, which means the history of the American church is tightly bound to the history of American culture, including colonialism, racism, and white supremacy. But how is it possible that a religion founded in the boundless love and compassion of Christ could ever align itself with the ideologies that have only brought harm?"

a. From your estimation, how strong is the link between the history of the American church and American culture?

b. Would you pose this chapter's question to your own congregation? Why or why not?

THERE IS NO CONCEPT OF RACE IN THE BIBLE (10:58)

10. Kristofer Dale Coffman explains, "There is no concept of race in the Bible, because race is a thoroughly modern construction. There are, though, a lot of things that look like race in the Bible."

a. What are some of the things Coffman lists as "things that look like race in the Bible"?

b. The narrator explains that white Christians in the US often interpret passages about ancient religious divides as parallels to "racial divides that were deemed essential to the success of the American experiment." Is this interpretation common in the context of your own congregation? Can you give some examples?

INTERPRETING AMERICA AS THE PROMISED LAND (12:26)

11. The narrator explains how the book of Joshua can be read in a way that supports the age of colonization and westward expansion: "North America became the Promised Land. The Pilgrims, the Puritans, and the Pioneers became God's chosen people, and the nations they were subduing were the many Indigenous tribes..."

a. When or where have you heard of America portrayed as "the Promised Land?"

b. The film names this violent interpretation as race-based theology. How prevalent is this thinking in your congregation? Do white Christians have a more obligation to address this deadly theology?

TWO CONTRASTING INTERPRETATIONS (14:41)

12. The film outlines two contrasting interpretive frameworks in the history of America: "Even as slave owners used the Bible to justify and sanctify the ownership and oppression of other human beings...the enslaved Africans embraced biblical narratives of justice and freedom, finding hope in the story of God's promise to deliver an oppressed people."

a. Have either of these two interpretations influenced how the people in your congregation approach reading the Bible?

b. How might you explain these two interpretive frameworks to others in your congregation?

WESTERN THEOLOGY AND OTHERNESS (16:42)

13. Dr. Soong-Cha Rah explains: "We centralize Western theology, by just calling it theology, and all the others are on the periphery—Black Theology, Womanist Theology, Liberation Theology—and we've created an otherness by saying you're not the norm."

a. Which theological traditions Dr. Rah lists have you encountered? Is there one that you and/or your congregation gravitate toward?

b. How can we raise awareness among our congregations of the existence of multiple non-Western Christian theologies?

c. Would the influence of a non-Western theology be something your congregation might affirm? Why or why not?

THE ASSUMPTION OF SUPERIORITY (17:16)

14. Many of the Christian leaders interviewed in this chapter talk about the problem of the traditional approach to Christian mission. As Dr. Rah explains, "It's the way we think about how we're going to bring our good American or Western progressive theology to a world that doesn't know any better. To say, we're going to go to...fix their theology for them... I think that assumption of the superiority of one culture or one people group over against the other is much more common than we realize."

a. Can you name some examples of how this assumption of superiority goes uncontested in most of Christianity in America?

A DIVERSITY OF VOICES (19:20)

15. The narrator ends the second chapter by saying, "The diversity of voices around the world serve to remind us that the Word of God carries a core message of inclusion and that God cannot be limited to one cultural expression."

a. Does the existence of multiple cultural expressions of the Christian faith imply the existence of multiple Christianities? Why or why not? Is this a good thing? Why or why not?

b. Do you agree with the narrator's claim about the Word of God carrying "a core message of inclusion?"

c. Can you name some ways where a message of racial inclusion is undermined by your congregation's culture?

THE GAPING HOLES IN US HISTORY (20:53)

16. The third chapter of the documentary begins with the narrator telling a familiar story of American progress. Dominique Gilliard points out, "There are these huge gaping holes in what we call US history because it's not told from the perspective of people of color; because it's not written or institutionally affirmed by people of color."

a. If you grew up in the US, would your pre-college education have challenged the quote from the O'Reilly Factor that "there is no organized effort to harm Black people by white people"?

b. What responsibility do white Christians have in learning and retelling US history as told from the perspective of people of color?

A VERY DIFFERENT PICTURE (21:07)

17. The narrator explains, "Filling in the gaping holes of US history paints a very different picture of what it means to celebrate the United States."

a. Before watching this film, were you aware of this "very different picture" of US history?

b. How important is it for you that our faith communities understand this "very different picture" of US history?

THIS STORY INCLUDES (21:07)

18. The narrator continues: "This story includes the beginning of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the growth of slavery across the English colonies. This story recognizes the resistance to evil among those who were enslaved and the commitment to slavery among white people."

"This story is characterized by the violence against black and brown bodies and born out of white supremacist theology, racist laws, and cultural oppression. One that celebrates Black achievement in the face of such oppression and confronts violence always. The narrative of white supremacy makes it possible to see only the story of progress."

a. In the quote above, what do you think the narrator means by "resistance to evil"?
By "White Supremacist theology"?

REV. ANGELA KHABEB'S STORY (22:22)

19. Rev. Angela Khabeb tells a story about her experience as the pastor of a rural congregation in rural Ohio where her family was "the only Black family in the town." She uses some very explicit language as she tells of a parishioner who violently tried to kill her husband and child as they were out for a walk.

a. How did her story make you feel? How did the language of her story make you feel?

b. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, Rev. Khabeb wrote, "We need the Spirit to blow through our nation as a mighty rushing wind, purging it of systemic racism and white supremacy. This is the work of the church." Do you agree? Why or why not?

REDLINING (25:00)

20. The narrator explains, "In the 1930s, as part of the New Deal, loan programs were created to help Americans purchase homes. In order to determine who received a loan, the government created color-coded maps where green neighborhoods indicated low risk and red neighborhoods were high risk." This practice is known as redlining.

a. Before watching this film, were you aware of the historical practice of redlining? Can you name any areas of your town, city, or region that were historically redlined communities? (For Ohio, visit <https://guides.osu.edu/maps/redlining>)

b. How important is this history for the work of anti-racism?

INVESTING IN WHITE COMMUNITIES (26:03)

21. Dominique Gilliard explains, "Right after World War II, we had this huge endowment (or investment) in the suburbs that came from the Federal Housing Authority. Of the \$120 Billion that was invested in suburban housing, less than 2% of that went to non-white families."

a. Has the benefit of home ownership been part of your family's experience?

b. Can you name any of the ways this historical imbalance of investment has resulted in racial disparities that are present today?

LEVITTOWN, PA (26:23)

22. One interviewee stated, "We understood that it was going to be all white, and we were very happy to buy a home here."

a. How did watching these interviews make you feel?

b. The video clip of interviews are from the 1957 film *Crisis in Levittown* (<https://youtu.be/1ww9OckLY1g>). If your community were to write the story of its own racial history, would it include stories that are similar or different to that of Levittown, PA ?

WHAT IS A WHITE HOMEOWNER TO DO? (27:11)

23. The narrator concludes the chapter with a summary and a rephrasing of the documentary's overarching question, "In the 19th century, the US government claimed that people of African descent were property. In the 20th century, the same government worked to ensure Black Americans couldn't own property. Predatory and biased lending practices have been exposed over and over in the United States, revealing a continuing systemic effort to withhold economic benefits from Black families that are readily available to white families. So what is a white homeowner to do?"

a. How would you answer this question?

THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY (28:25)

24. The narrator opens the chapter, "When Christopher Columbus arrived on the shores of a new world in 1492, he brought with him a belief in his God-given right to take over any lands he found in the name of Spain and Christianity. This right was given to Columbus and all European explorers by various Papal edicts that came to be known as the Doctrine of Discovery. It is hard to overstate the impact that the Doctrine of Discovery has had on the world in the last 500 years."

a. When or where was the first time you had heard the term the Doctrine of Discovery?

b. Can you name any elements of American society that are rooted in the Doctrine of Discovery?

REPUDIATING THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY (28:25)

25. At the direction of a resolution passed by General Synod 29, a joint working group of Council for American Indian Ministries (CAIM) and Justice and Witness Ministries (JWM) of the United Church of Christ produced a document in the summer of 2015 titled, *The Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery: A Biblical Reflection*. That document began stating that the Doctrine of Discovery "provided the spiritual rationale for Europeans since the times of the Crusades to conquer and confiscate other lands, including what is now the United States."

- a. Has your congregation ever utilized this or similar resources? Why or why not?

WHO DOES THIS LAND BELONG TO? (29:24)

26. Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs explains, "The Doctrine of Discovery is basically an agreement between the European nations in the 15th century. Whoever discovers it first and lays claim to the land, they own that. If Portugal goes out and discovers some land in Western Africa and 15 years later France goes out and discovers the same land, who does this land belong to?"

a. How does understanding the Doctrine of Discovery problematize the question "Who does this land belong to?"

b. Consider this question as it concerns property ownership in the United States.

THE THEOLOGICAL AUTHORITY TO ENSLAVE NON-CHRISTIANS (29:52)

27. Rev. Jacobs continues explaining the Doctrine of Discovery: "It essentially starts out as this peace agreement between European nations. But really what it becomes is the theological authority to enslave non-Christian people, and also just to strip their land of all the resources. Any movable or immovable good now belongs to the crown."

a. When Rev. Jacobs says "the theological authority to enslave non-Christian people," what is he referring to?

b. Are there elements of Christianity in America today that can be traced back to the Doctrine of Discovery?

ON A HIGHER LEVEL WITH GOD (30:33)

28. Rev. Joan Conroy explains the theological impact of the papal bull of 1452, the *Dum Diversas*: "It allowed white people...to put themselves on a higher level of their relationship with God."

a. This edict of 1452 was 569 years ago. How important is this information for Christians in America today?

b. What are some ways that this theological notion of a "higher level" of relationship with God still operates in the U.S. today?

THE ANNIHILATION OF NATIVE IDENTITY (33:23)

29. The narrator explains, "The hunger for land required policies for the removal or eradication of Native communities. These included forced relocation to reservations, forced conversion to Christianity, outlawing native spiritual practice, and child removal to boarding schools." As Rev. Joan Conroy tells in her story, "They took our family away; they took our identity away; we really became non-children." The narrator continues, "The boarding school system aspired to nothing less than the total annihilation of Native identity."

- a. How did Rev. Conroy's story make you feel?
- b. What are some of the dangerous theological precepts that were used to justified the force conversions of the Native American children?

IGNORING PART OF GOD'S CREATION (36:33)

30. The narrator closes this chapter with the statement, "The erasure of Native identity in America and in Christianity has left all of us looking at an incomplete image of the world. When we ignore cultures, erase authentic identities, we ignore part of God's creation."

a. What are some ways the theological claims of this documentary are consistent and/or inconsistent with your own denomination or tradition?

b. What are some ways white Christians in America can repent and repair from the damage that has resulted from ignoring part of God's creation?

A LONG HISTORY OF TENSION (38:24)

31. Chapter 5 opens with images of the Women's March in DC after the election of 2016. The narrator explains, "Because some considered the Women's March to be primarily an expression of white interests, it places the event in a long history of tension between the efforts for women's equality and advancing rights for people of color."

a. Before viewing this documentary, how aware were you of this "long history of tension"?

THE PROBLEM OF SUSAN B. ANTHONY (39:40)

32. A dramatization of the voice of Susan B. Anthony quotes her: "We say, if you will not give the whole loaf of suffrage to the entire people, give it to the most intelligent first. If intelligence, justice, and morality are to have precedence in the government, let the question of the woman be brought up first, and that of the negro, last."

a. Were you surprised to hear about the views of this celebrated leader of the Women's Suffrage movement?

b. The narrator explains that, while her "legacy in the feminist movement stands, and should, it should not be divorced from her legacy on race." What lessons does this episode in the history of US Civil Rights hold out for us today?

THE LEGACY OF ELLA BAKER (41:59)

33. Dr. Crystal Moten explains, "Ella Baker's life becomes kind of a mirror through which we could see the lives of other women. The fact that we have many Black women working behind the scenes doing all types of work for the movement, and yet we know very little about them. And Ella Baker really caused us to redefine and rethink leadership and the democratic potential of civil rights."

a. Prior to watching documentary, how aware were you of the importance of Ella Baker and women of color in the Civil Rights Movement?

b. Are there elements of Ella Baker's story that remind you of the story of biblical prophets?

KIMBERLIÉ CRENSHAW: INTERSECTIONALITY (42:25)

34. The narrator explains, "There is a word for the combined experience of oppression that women of color have faced in the United States. It's a word that has become very popular in recent years: Intersectionality." The narrator continues, "The word intersectionality was coined by civil rights activist and professor Kimberlié Crenshaw in 1989, calling attention to the reality that an individual can experience compounding oppression from multiple directions for different aspects of their identity."

a. Prior to viewing this documentary, had you encountered the word "intersectionality"?

b. If you were to describe intersectionality in your own words, how would you describe it?

MULTIPLE FORMS OF OPPRESSION (43:39)

33. A quote in the film from Audre Lorde states, "I simply do not believe that one aspect of myself can possibly profit from the oppression of any other part of my identity...within the lesbian community, I am Black, and within the Black community, I am a lesbian...I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only."

a. Audre Lorde illustrates how multiple forms of oppression can operate simultaneously. What other forms of oppression can be seen to exist simultaneously?

b. Can the church afford the luxury of simultaneously following Jesus and being committed to fighting one form of oppression only? Why or why not?

BLACK LIVES MATTER: A LEADERFUL MOVEMENT (44:40)

36. The narrator explains, "Black Lives Matter was created by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors..." Dr. Crystal Moten comments, "Instead of having one particular charismatic leader, they don't have that. They call their movement a 'leaderful' movement. I think the fact that not only is it three women but three queer women...that's really important for thinking about ways we can be more intersectional in our approach to justice."

a. What do you think about the notion of a "leaderful movement"? What might the church learn from such a leadership model?

b. What are some ways Christian communities can "be more intersectional in our approach to justice"?

RICHARD ALLEN LEADS THE SEPARATION (46:12)

40. The narrator concludes the story of Richard Allen leading “the entire Black membership out of the building.” And then she quotes Allen, “...we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no longer plagued by us.” As the narrator explained, Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church. It was “the first independent denomination founded by Black people in the U.S.”

a. Was this the first time you have heard this story? What stands out for you?

b. The narrator explains that “after the Civil War and the end of slavery, the divide between the white church and the Black church remained wide.” Have you ever attended a church of a different race or ethnicity?

THE GREAT MIGRATION (46:43)

37. The narrator explains that after the Civil War and the end of slavery, the divide between the white church and the Black church continued to grow. "In the early 20th century, facing rampant inequality, voter suppression, persecution and violence, droves of Black families moved out of the rural southern United States into urban areas of the Northeast, Midwest, and West, in what is called the Great Migration."

a. Prior to viewing this documentary, did you ever hear the term "The Great Migration"?

b. Are you aware of how the Great Migration transformed communities in your area?

THE GREAT MIGRATION, CONTINUED (47:53)

38. Dr. Crystal Moten explains, "What we know that happened during the Great Migration is this mass group of African Americans moving into these urban places creates housing problems. So, instead of many cities firmly addressing these housing problems, what typically happens is overcrowding. In conjunction with overcrowding, what happens is that white folks also are leaving neighborhoods."

a. What are some ways this mass migration might have impacted church communities in your area?

b. When Dr. Moten says "instead of...firmly addressing these housing problems," what does she mean? What would "firmly addressing these housing problems" look like?

THE URBAN-SUBURBAN CHURCH DIVIDE (48:15)

39. Dr. Soong-Chan Rah explains about the Great Migration, "And that's when you see the growth of the mega-churches in the suburbs because a lot of the churches in the cities were being abandoned by white protestants and moved to the suburbs and created these kind of communities in the suburbs that are white middle, upper-middle class communities, as well as white middle, upper-middle class churches. And many of the urban centers became places where ethnic minority churches were started."

a. Is the narrative helpful for understanding why Christianity in America is still so divided?

b. Can you tell the story of the Great Migration in the communities or regions where you live?

STILL HIGHLY SEGREGATED (48:34)

40. The narrator explains, "Despite the progress of the Civil Rights Movement, school desegregation, and policies like Affirmative Action, Christian communities have remained highly segregated." She continues, "Unlike most large U.S. Institutions, the church is not required by law to integrate. Congregations are made of individuals who intentionally choose to come together. Which means, a majority of Christians are choosing segregation."

a. Do you agree with the way the narrator has characterized the situation—that "a majority of Christians are choosing segregation"? How does that make you feel?

WHITE CULTURAL NORMS (49:15)

41. The narrator explained, “even well-meaning, white congregations who might want to reflect the full diversity of the U.S. population struggle with the reality that their theology and practices are immersed in white cultural norms that alienate people of color.”

a. What cultural norms can you name that are present in your congregations beliefs and practices?

b. Prof. Debra Leigh tells about her experience visiting a white congregation; "I sat down; I was prayed over; I was sang to; I was preached at; and I was dismissed. For me, there was no spiritual component to the worship service, and I thought it was very sterile." Have you ever experienced feeling excluded when visiting a congregation?

FINDING COMMON GROUND (51:59)

42. The narrator asked, "Can Black and White Christianity find common ground? Can the chasm between us created by racism and white supremacy be overcome?"

a. After listening to the different interviews and experiences in this documentary, how would you answer this question?

WHITE JESUS (52:22)

42. Rev. Lenny Duncan describes his reaction to seeing a white Jesus, "I see a white Jesus, that's telling me that whiteness is good; that whiteness is holiness; and that even the Savior that came to save us is white."

a. Does your church have any paintings of a white Jesus?

b. Does your church have any paintings of a Jesus of color?

IS IT EVEN POSSIBLE? (55:12)

43. The narrator asks, "How can a church immersed in white supremacy even begin to reconcile its ongoing legacy of exclusion, oppression, and violence. Is it even possible?"

a. How would you answer the narrator's question?

THE ASSUMPTION OF PRIOR BALANCE (55:22)

44. Rev. Angela Khabeb describes the challenge, "Reconciliation takes things that are out of balance and brings them back into balance. But the assumption is that there was a balance, to begin with." Similarly, Dr. DeYoung says, "Reconciliation requires a prior healthy relationship, which we don't have in the United States."

a. Is reconciliation an emphasis in your congregation?

b. Has this film caused you to rethink your understanding of what reconciliation looks like?

COLORBLINDNESS (56:19)

45. Dr. Curtiss P. DeYoung explains, "Colorblindness at a sort of very simplistic level, seems like what we should all embrace. The reality is, if I don't see someone's color who is not white, then I don't see the fact that they experience racism...It basically means 'I see you as white. I see you like me. I've made you into my own image.' And it strips away all difference of culture."

a. Have you heard the term "colorblindness" or similar notions mentioned in your congregation?

b. Would you consider your faith community as one that deals with difference directly or one that lives in denial of difference?

PLAYING GAMES OF FAITH (58:01)

46. Dr. Soong-Chan Rah explains, "To be blunt, most of the dead bodies in American history are black and brown and red bodies. And if we ignore the dead bodies and we don't lament over the dead bodies, we're just kind of playing the games of faith here. We're just pretending that things are OK when they're really not."

a. How would you explain what Dr. Rah means by ignoring "the dead bodies"?

b. What are some ways your congregation can more faithfully address "the dead bodies"?

THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN WALKING THE PATH (1:00:36)

47. Rev. Lenny Duncan ends the documentary by saying, "This stuff is not happening in a vacuum. The last four or five years is not some anomaly in human history. And there have been people who have been walking this path for a long time. You need to find them, you need to listen to them, and you need to ask, what can I do? And sometimes, 'what can I do' is to shut up and listen."

a. When Rev. Duncan points to "people who have been walking this path for a long time," who does he mean?

b. Is your congregation in partnership with any leaders or organizations that "have been walking this path for a long time?" If not, how can you change that?