

Lancaster Theological Seminary

**Inviting White Congregations to Discover, through Research,  
Their Complicity in Perpetuating Racial Injustice**

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Doctor of Ministry

by

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Inviting White Congregations to Discover, through Research, Their Complicity in Perpetuating  
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## **Abstract**

Christian churches have been part of the creation of America from day one for the purpose of evangelism and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. In practice, however, the Christian church for centuries has participated in theft of land from indigenous Americans and has benefitted from the unpaid labor and/or sale of enslaved Africans. These egregious actions have created generations of trauma for Black and Brown peoples in America, often also creating the segregation of white Christians from people of color. The racist policies toward indigenous people have worsened over time--from the attempted genocide via force-marched relocations across the country, to Indian boarding schools, to the attempted erasure of their culture, language, land, and heritage. Racist policies for Black Americans also have worsened, after enslavement, to Jim Crow Laws, voter and other civil rights suppression, redlining, inequity, and lesser opportunities for education, health care, nutrition, housing, and jobs. White churches, when they choose to try to help, treat symptoms of racial disparity rather than working to change racist systems. But before any of this work can truly be undertaken, white churches first need to examine their own histories; for example, looking into how they acquired their land, if local indigenous peoples were compensated if the church was founded 50 years from the founding of the State, and how the church has benefitted from racist policies. Once this research is completed, then white churches can discern the next steps. This Major Project details related aspects of American history and invites white churches to work through questions in a manual to move from awareness of complicity to steps towards creating a better community with all their neighbors.

For my family members Dr. Ethel Saxman, Dr. William and Dr. Savannah Furman,

I follow in your footsteps.

The words thank you are not strong enough to convey to my wife Katrina Furman who comforted me, supported me, and nurtured me to help me complete this major project.

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To my Anishinabek family: Chi Miigwetch!

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## Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	9
Acknowledgment of Historical Racism Against Indigenous Americans.....	9
Acknowledgment of Historical Racism Against Black and Brown Americans.....	12
Acknowledgment of Historical Complicity of Racism from White Congregations.....	15
Acknowledgment of Historical Racism in American Higher Education.....	22
Chapter 3: Indigenous Culture and White Congregations.....	26
Chapter 4: White Church Culture.....	37
Chapter 5: White Church Complicity in Racism.....	48
Chapter 6: White Churches Perpetuate Racial Injustice.....	65
Chapter 7: Historiographical Studies.....	75
Chapter 8: Resource Manual.....	78
Chapter 9: Topics for Future Exploration.....	91
Bibliography.....	93

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The year was 2020. I had been looking forward to this year over the previous few years, thinking it would be a good time, six years into my third pastorate, to do some visioning for the future. I thought calling the process 2020 Vision would be a fun play on words, and that we could discern some clarity and some focus for our ministries. But the world had other things in store for 2020. Early in the year, there were reports of a fast-spreading illness running rampant in China. Within weeks it had spread to other Asian nations. I watched an evening cable news show where a solemn epidemiologist told an anchor that by summer, the United States would be shut down-- with schools and businesses closing their doors, and everyone sheltering in their homes--and the anchor simply did not believe the expert and brushed it off. I wasn't much better, wondering what that would mean for my church, my congregation, their jobs, their children, my job? Tensions and anxiety began to grow. By March, COVID was uncontrollable in Europe, especially Italy, and the first cases were being diagnosed in several US states. Tensions continued to rise. Travel bans started. The New York City public schools shut down. As cases started to rise in my area, our church decided to close our building and learn how to provide worship online only. By April, the CDC suggested all people start wearing masks in public. Some did, some did not. Tensions rose over mask wearing. Tensions rose over schools closing. Tensions rose over people stocking up on toilet paper, creating mass nation-wide shortages. Early numbers released from the Chicago Department of Public Health stated that Black people accounted for 68% of COVID deaths and were dying at a rate of nearly six times greater than white-Chicagoans. The same was true in Detroit as well as in other highly urban US cities. Tensions and fears rose. New York City became overwhelmed by a demand for ventilators, followed by images of workers carrying out body bags from the hospitals that

couldn't keep up with the demand for help. Supplies of N95 masks ran out across the nation. Citizens pulled out their sewing machines and started making masks out of pillowcases or whatever materials they had on hand at home. Tensions and fears continued to rise. In May, the unemployment rate soared to 14.7%, the highest since the Great Depression. Twenty million Americans were out of work. Delivery drivers, take-out drivers, and grocery store clerks were deemed essential. Tensions and fears continued to rise. The Navajo Nation had the highest COVID infection rate per capita in the US. The recorded death toll from COVID in the US surpassed 100,000.

In the middle of all this national fear and tension, on May 25, a Black man walks into a grocery store in Minneapolis to purchase some cigarettes. He pays with a \$20 bill and exits the store. Store employees think the bill may be counterfeit, so they call the police. The police arrive and confront the man, George Floyd, who is sitting in his car outside of the store. The police begin to interrogate Mr. Floyd, but Mr. Floyd is not interested in what they have to say. Eventually the police get him out of the car, place him in handcuffs, and start towards a police car to take him in on the charge of forgery. Mr. Floyd says he has anxiety and wishes not to be put into a small police car. A few minutes later, more police arrived. The tension escalated. Mr. Floyd is brought to the ground with one policeman holding him down by his chest and another kneeling on his neck. Several passersby began recording the event with their phones. Despite the store owner and pedestrian witnesses pleading with the police to stand down, and with ambulance first responders present but not helping, the police choose to become the judiciary, find Mr. Floyd guilty of possibly using a piece of paper incorrectly to purchase a different kind of paper, and then, the police execute Mr. Floyd in the street in a matter of minutes.

They deprive him of his right to freedom, ignore that he is innocent until proven guilty, and they deprive him of the freedom of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

For days I was in a daze, continually seeing the emotionless white policeman executing a Black citizen in broad daylight with dozens of people watching. Protests began in Minneapolis and then spread across the nation, including Grand Rapids just 15 minutes or so from my church. What happened in Minneapolis was affecting the world around us as well as throughout our neighborhoods. What should our response be as a church? What should my response be as a white pastor of a mostly white church?

Three years before, in May 2017, after a year and a half of study, prayer, and discussion, my church voted to become Open and Affirming for all groups of people, including those who find themselves in marginalized parts of society and those who are judged and deemed not worthy to be members or leaders of other churches because of who they love or how they identify, or their gender, or their marital status, or their economic worth. Our congregation chose to be affirming as we follow Christ's directive to love our neighbor. The first group of neighbors on the list that we chose to affirm are people of every race. I worked to put that group first, even though I knew that our church wanted to focus first on affirming the LGBTQ communities who were more publicly being cast out of churches and homes, and turned away from their own rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness due to society's fears. So, we created a safe place, and our ministry and congregation grew. But in the back of my mind, I also knew that our small town was growing, and it was slowly growing more diverse, I wanted us to have a conversation about race at some point, but I had no idea how to do that.

The nightly news in 2020 was relentless, showing George Floyd being murdered over and over on an endless loop. This was just the most recent example of a growing, discomforting

trend of police killing Black people, often who were unarmed, often before their due process of being brought before a judge and having their day in court. Eric Garner, Ahmad Arbery, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor. And then George Floyd. With all the news coverage, in addition to my heartache over the killing, I was aghast by the eyes and face of the white policeman who extinguished the life of another person, looking directly into a camera with no compassion, no recognition that what he was doing was wrong. I realized that I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what.

A day or two after Mr. Floyd's death, I received a phone call from a person in the community who I didn't know, asking if our church would participate in a silent protest of George Floyd's murder. I immediately said yes. I live in a small mid-western, mainly white, mainly conservative town and though we didn't know each other and though we didn't know what the response from the community would be like, we told a few people about it. On the Thursday of that week, 17 of us showed up, wearing masks, socially distancing ourselves from each other, holding signs on the side of the road near a park in town. Several people driving by honked in support. One or two seemed not to be supportive. But overall, the experience was positive. We decided to do it again, this time in two days on a Saturday, the same experience: silent protest, masked, socially distant. And each of the 17 attendees shared the event on social media.

The next day, the community member who was the co-director of the event called me. She was distressed and said that she had been receiving intimidating phone calls from the police about our Saturday event and so she had decided not to attend and was going to go to an undisclosed place to find shelter. Soon after that, I began to receive intimidating phone calls from the police asking me what my intentions were for the event, if we planned to riot, if we

planned to disrupt the flow of traffic. I assured them that this was a silent protest, to be alongside the road, that we would not impede traffic, and that we would be peaceful. I asked them to join us, and they told me that they couldn't take sides.

On Saturday, I arrived at the park an hour early. Three hundred people also were there! As we approached the start time, I got everyone's attention, told them that we would line up along the side of the road, that this was to be a silent protest, that we would not impede traffic, and that after one hour we would disperse. That is exactly what happened. The only difference from the Thursday event was that instead of 17 people along the park, 300 people stood along one side of the road for several blocks. It was an amazing, peaceful experience. And I knew at that moment that I wanted to do more. I just didn't know what.

By June, our church building had been closed for three months and riots began to spread across the nation--because of the murder of George Floyd but also because the tensions and fears of the pandemic, high unemployment, and sporadic shortages of goods spilled out into the streets. The Black Lives Matter movement caught the momentum of the moment and swept the nation. Some communities proclaimed the message from on high while white communities splintered into factions. Some were amenable to the movement, but others began to wrestle with unresolved and likely never processed generational privilege that became threatened by the messaging of Black lives mattering.

By mid-summer, protests continued both across the nation and around the world, as people of all walks of life protested the injustice. By mid-summer, our church had figured out how to worship online, how to celebrate communion in a pandemic exile using technology as a vehicle for blessing elements, how to support the mission and ministry of the church financially via online giving and mailed in checks. One day, I noticed on Facebook that my seminary was

offering Doctor of Ministry classes online. I had never considered pursuing such a degree, but the seminary was so instrumental in shaping my ministry that I decided it wouldn't hurt to send an email to see if they could help me transform my own unresolved desire to do something into action. My alma mater for my Master of Divinity, Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, told me that I would need to hone my focus but that yes, I was approved to start classes.

As I started to share with my classmates and professors what I wanted to do, I was met with resistance from both white and black colleagues. "Are you sure you want to do that?" "People are going to be uncomfortable about that." I was somewhat surprised by these reactions. The purpose of my work is not to make people uncomfortable; the purpose is to work towards making things better. It may be uncomfortable work, but when is following Jesus comfortable?

My experience at seminary brought in a whole host of new resources; textbooks, study formats, deep conversations with professors and classmates. My idea started to germinate. I began to find sources that acknowledged this discomfort in society. "Whenever someone deigns to mention how white culture profited from multiple centuries of human trafficking, a national legacy of enslavement, imperialistic land grabs and attempts and Native American genocide, the white rebuttal is normally 'Oh, that was a long time ago, get over it. Stop living in the past. At some point, we just have to move on.'"<sup>1</sup> Other sources say that this kind of discomfort proves that we need to have more conversation. "Once we understand how white privilege operates, we can begin to take steps to dismantle it on both a personal and institutional level."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Wise, *Dear White America: Letter to a New Minority* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Paula S. Rothenberg, *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2008), 1.

Two authors began to rise to the surface in my studies: Ibram Kendi and Jemar Tisby. One of them said something that was the pivotal moment in my discernment about how to frame my major project. Both authors inspired me, saying, “white people should not talk about healing racism without first acknowledging that racism exists.” This was the point at which I discerned that white congregations have done a poor job of acknowledging racism exists. Many white congregations want to dismantle racism, but they don’t know where to start. At that moment, I realized I wanted to focus my major project on helping white congregations acknowledge not only that racism exists, but that they are or in their histories have been complicit, knowingly or unknowingly, in perpetuating racial injustice. I want to be clear; I am not saying that all white churches are white supremacist or intentionally racist, but all white churches in America have benefited from historical, systemic, and generational racism and in benefitting from racist policies and ideologies, white churches are complicit. Once white churches recognize and acknowledge these truths, then they can begin steps toward dismantling racism.

In the middle of my doctoral program, I took my first ever ministerial sabbatical: three months away from the day-to-day work as a pastor to focus on something else for a while. My chosen path for my sabbatical was to follow the civil rights trails from Memphis to Selma to Montgomery to Atlanta; then to follow the Trails of Tears from Cherokee, North Carolina to Tahlequah, Oklahoma; then to travel from Jefferson’s Monticello to Colonial Williamsburg to Washington D.C.; then to take a closer look at the Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Indian boarding school as well as learning about indigenous culture in Michigan and Wisconsin. As I travelled from city to city, I noticed Christian churches in each location, sometimes in places of great duress and suffering. I began to wonder: How did the white churches at the time of slavery, at the time of boarding schools, at the time of the Trails of Tears, at the time of civil rights marches through

Selma and other Southern cities, respond to each of these and so many other injustices? Were they complicit? Were they vocal? Were they supportive? Did they protest? Were they silent? Do the pastors or current church members know their own history about how they responded back then? Does that influence how they respond to racial injustice now? Do they know if their churches paid for, stole, or were given stolen indigenous land? Do they know if their church benefited directly or indirectly from the enslavement of trafficked Africans? This major project addresses the injustice of racism in America from the beginning explorations to the arrival of European settlers; it addresses the injustice of stealing indigenous lands and forced marching of indigenous peoples west; it addresses how the enslavement of trafficked Africans generated wealth from the South to the North, benefitting all of white society including white churches; it addresses how Jim Crow laws perpetuated racism into American culture long after slavery was abolished; it addresses how white churches continued to benefit from denying Black Americans access to wealth from jobs, to good education, to owning homes, and then not being able to pass that wealth to the next generation; and lastly, this major project invites white congregations to look into their own histories much like major American educational institutions such as Harvard, Princeton, Brown, and others have identified their own complicity and then implemented ways to acknowledge their complicity and give back to the community as part of their acknowledgment. Before we can start to work, we need to look in the mirror, look into our own histories, make some acknowledgments of racism from the beginning that even affected or were started by churches, and to discover through research our own church complicity in perpetuating racial injustice.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Authors Ibram X. Kendi and Jemar Tisby write that white peoples need to acknowledge racism before trying to change, reduce, or erase racism. With that revelation, I began to search for sources that would lead me on a journey to inspire white congregations to look within their histories to see how their actions or inactions, their interactions or silence contributed to racial injustices. Most white congregations celebrate their origin stories but are not aware of how their own decisions about where to build, whose land it was before their arrival, impacted the indigenous peoples who lived there first and who still inhabit the neighborhoods. Most white congregations are not aware of how their church benefitted from the atrocities of enslaving trafficked Africans, Jim Crow laws, segregation, redlining, white flight, and other systemic racist policies. Most white congregations have not looked at their own complicity in perpetuating racial injustice. And most white congregations are not aware of the complicity of racist policies in other American institutions that benefitted both from land stolen from Indigenous nations as well as from the free labor or sale of Black and Brown enslaved peoples. Some higher educational American institutions are now starting their own processes of acknowledgment from which white churches can learn and emulate.

### Acknowledgment of Historical Racism Against Indigenous Americans

Before hearing an outsider person's reflections on Turtle Island / America and Indigenous Americans, I turned first to the work of an indigenous American author, Edward Benton-Banai's, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway*. Benton-Banai shares the Ojibway creation stories, the stories of the first peoples, teachings about how to live and make shelter, what foods to eat, how to give spiritual thanks, the sacred teachings of the seven grandfathers: "(1) To cherish knowledge is to know **Wisdom**, (2) to know **Love** is to know peace, (3) to honor all of

the Creation is to have **Respect**, (4) **Bravery** is to face the foe with integrity, (5) **Honesty** in facing a situation is to be brave, (6) **Humility** is to know yourself as a sacred part of the Creation, and (7) **Truth** is to know all of these things.”<sup>1</sup> Benton-Banai includes other teachings, such as the clan system, where indigenous peoples, in noticing how every beloved creature has a purpose in the environment, recognize that some people are leaders like animals who lead, and others are organizers like animals that are organized, etc. Benton-Banai concludes with stories about first contact with white travelers. Some come in peace to trade, others come with violence and cause disruption. Some black coats (priests) talk of love and others preach damnation while colluding and sharing intelligence with invading armies. Benton-Banai shares origin stories not unlike any other cultural celebration story. White churches need to acknowledge the importance of the existence and rich heritage of the indigenous peoples who lived for thousands of years on land where their church properties now rest, and the existence and rich cultural significance of the indigenous peoples around them now.

White American origin stories often tell fantastic tales about Columbus accidentally “discovering” a new continent ready to be conquered; Pilgrims and Puritans arriving for religious freedoms; friendly encounters with Indians who teach white settlers how to survive here; Lewis and Clark boldly braving the rapids of mighty rivers, climbing mountains, and mapping out “uncharted” lands with small credit to Sacagawea, a teenage girl who pointed out the way for them. These and so many other tales point to language I have heard white church members say in several locations in America that “there was nothing here before our church started here.” Western movies depict a great frontier to be explored without showing the civilized nations of

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 64.

people already living there who instead are portrayed in stereotypical racist ways, often by white people with red paint on their faces. None of these tales mention, give credit to, or are even in awe of the millions of people who already lived here for tens of thousands of years, who had established great cities, huge structures, and mounds for ceremonies and burials that are documented by Angie Debo in her book, *A History of the Indians of the United States*.

David Stannard also well documents the history of American indigenous peoples in his book *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*, reminding us about the rise of the Inca, the Maya, the Aztec, the Olmec, as well as the great builders of the city of Cahokia near the Mississippi River now in Illinois. Debo and Stannard then turn their attention to the atrocities carried out against the indigenous peoples by white conquerors and later by white settlers. Debo reminds us of the Catholic Church's proclamation, the Doctrine of Discovery, which invited explorers to take land in the name of the Church. She also notes the Indian Removal Act of Congress in 1830, which abolished all indigenous government and took land by force, even if previously contracted by purchase or treaty, and removed all indigenous people, relocating many to Oklahoma including the nations of the Creek, Choctaw, Cherokee, Seminole, and Chickasaw.<sup>2</sup> The forced march of thousands from their homes on the Trails of Tears, the forced settlement of indigenous peoples onto reservation land unwanted by whites, the attempts of genocide and/or attempts to erase indigenous language, culture, and spirituality with the creation of Indian boarding schools; all of these events are mostly unknown to modern-day white congregations, even though their founders must have been aware of, if not participated in or supported, at least some of these atrocities perpetrated on their neighbors. These resources among others in the

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<sup>2</sup> Angie Debo, *A History of the Indians of the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 117, 125.

bibliography help white congregations to acknowledge historical racism against indigenous Americans.

### **Acknowledgment of Historical Racism Against Black and Brown Americans**

Nikole Hannah-Jones put together a masterful retelling of the origin story of Black Americans in *The 1619 Project*. This compilation of photographs, poetry, and personal stories brings to light the harsh atrocities of enslavement from 400 years ago to the present. Enslaved Black Africans forcibly brought to America, separated from their families, and deprived of their humanity, were enslaved upon arrival if they survived the arduous journey. An estimated 12 million Africans made the journey and an estimated 2 million died along the way.<sup>3</sup> Those who survived were forced to adapt immediately to a new culture, a new climate, a new language. They were punished if they tried to maintain their language, their culture, their faith, their identity. They were forced to work under duress, in extreme conditions, with limited supplies of basic food and shelter.

Hannah-Jones and others take a closer look at the history of Black Americans through the lenses of race, the raising of crops, the generational effects of fear and trauma, how their efforts affect capitalism and citizenship, how the yearning for freedom was matched with racist policies over the centuries that would limit or reverse forward progress, the realities of limited travel, the imposition of medical experimentation, and the pursuit of justice and civil rights. “They worked on the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. They laid the foundations for the White House and the U.S. Capitol. They built the railroad fueling the Industrial Revolution. And they built the vast fortunes for white people in the North and in the South.”<sup>4</sup> Reading *The 1619 Project*, it’s hard to believe that the United States not only does not

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<sup>3</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project* (New York: One World, 2021), 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah-Jones, *1619*, 10.

acknowledge its racist past, but that there are not statues and annual recognitions of the fact that the wealth enjoyed now is directly connected to the work of enslaved Africans.

One of the two authors who spoke to me the most in my project is Jemar Tisby. His book *The Color of Compromise* is a precise narrative of the American history of racism, but also, as will be shared in the next section, he masterfully connects American racism to the Christian Church. While a contingent of Americans currently is trying to reduce or erase teaching that slavery happened in American history because the subject is uncomfortable for white children and parents to learn, white Americans are probably less familiar with the harsh realities of the effects of Jim Crow laws on Black and Brown Americans because this subject has not been taught in white schools. Tisby connects racist Jim Crow laws with the Ku Klux Klan who enforced the laws with the help of local police departments and church leaders. The name Jim Crow comes from a minstrel singer played in the 1830s and 1840s by a white person in blackface, whose stereotypical behavior included diminished intelligence, poor grammar, and blissful contentment in slavery. With the advent of emancipation, whites continued to limit progress of and for Black Americans through Jim Crow laws which led to segregation policies in schools, restaurants, buses, churches, and throughout communities across the nation. Tisby shares how white veterans returning from World War II received the benefits of the GI bill helping them purchase homes and go to school, while Black veterans did not. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was intended for emancipation, but a loophole, “those duly convicted of a crime could be forced to labor as part of their punishment,” leads instead to a multi-generational racist system of mass incarceration for Black Americans who serve their time essentially maintaining slave labor, especially in the South.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 105.

Tisby challenges the reader, saying, “there is a difference between complicit and courageous Christianity. Complicit Christianity devalues the image of God in people of color. Courageous Christianity embraces racial and ethnic diversity. It stands against any person, policy, or practice that would dim the glory of God.”<sup>6</sup> This gives Christians a new avenue moving forward: acknowledge complicity but then be courageous about working for social justice and change. He suggests churches work towards awareness, relationships, and commitment.

Robin DiAngelo’s *Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm* is a reminder to white Americans who think we are post racism in America that indeed not only does racism persist but that well-intentioned white progressives contribute knowingly and sometimes unknowingly to perpetuating racism. More will be said about white progressives in the next section, but DiAngelo also reminds white Americans that terrorist actions have been a part of systemic control of Black and Brown Americans from the start. Lynching was at times a public affair happening after worship on Sundays in town squares, at other times at night striking intentional fear. Some would argue that lynching still exists today, perhaps not in such a systemic and publicly supported manner, but arguably George Floyd was lynched in broad daylight by a white policeman with people watching in the center of town.

DiAngelo also discusses how Black and Brown Americans were systemically excluded from receiving FHA loans to purchase homes. One of the stories of American wealth and success is the passing of wealth from one generation to the next in the form of inheritance monies, land, and homes. When Black and Brown Americans are excluded from loans to

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<sup>6</sup> Tisby, *Compromise*, 24.

purchase homes, they are excluded from building capital, and saving for retirement, and thus are unable to help their children and grandchildren be better off than they were, while white Americans pursue the future with far more success.

Joseph Barndt's *Becoming an Anti-Racist Church: Journeying toward Wholeness* describes redlining practices of segregating Black and Brown homebuyers by only granting loans for homes in less appealing neighborhoods and declining loans in more affluent and desirable locations. This is then made worse with lower governmental funding in Black and Brown neighborhoods, preventing educational advancement for children and youth. Redlining also leads to a lack of jobs and a lack of affordable nutritious foods, with cheaper, dollar-menu fast food more readily accessible than grocery stores with fresh fruits and vegetables, leading to poor health in the community. Many of these intentional societal systems create frustration which can lead to anger and/or crime, further setting back people of color who just want to get ahead like the rest of the population. Redlining is an intentional system from white culture to keep people of color from advancing.

### **Acknowledgment of Historical Complicity of Racism from White Congregations**

Joseph Barndt's wisdom and research continues in this section on racism from white congregations. He discusses churches responding to the needs in their surrounding communities by treating the symptoms of racism without changing the systemic problems that create the symptoms. He refers to this as reactionary ministry or charity in place of justice. Barndt also describes a modern look at the concept of "blessing," saying that wealthy white congregations celebrate their wealth and prosperity as a blessing from God and do not acknowledge the systemic racist policies that contributed to and/or generated that wealth. When white church members benefit from access to well-funded education from pre-school to college or higher,

when white church members then benefit from higher paying jobs, when white church members then have access to larger homes in nicer neighborhoods where they can build capital, and when white church members then give at higher rates to their churches than members of churches of color can afford, it is disingenuous for white churches to credit God for showing them favor over other churches when the system has been put in place to benefit white culture over others.

Barndt shares how early white American Christians endorsed the horrors of slavery by noting that Jesus never spoke out against it and Paul likened himself to being a slave for Christ. Early white American Christians also chose to limit the freedom of new life in Christ to themselves, passing laws that enslaved Black Americans could not claim their freedom from slavery if / when they were baptized into the Christian faith. Only whites could truly celebrate the freedom of Christ's light and love in their lives by law. Several denominations during colonial times allowed clergy and church members to own enslaved people. Barndt reminds us that untold numbers of white Christian church members and clergy were card-carrying members of the Ku Klux Klan, inciting violence at night and preaching the good news in church. And even though not all white American Christians were Catholic, many of these racist policies were based on the Papal Doctrine of Discovery granting explorers, seekers of religious freedom, and conquerors the right to seize land and property, and to enslave African peoples as the will of God.

In his book, *Myths America Lives By: White Supremacy and the Stories that Give Us Meaning*, Richard Hughes sets the tone for how white colonial Christians came to see themselves as more important than peoples of other races. "If one imagines one's tribe or clan or nation as a chosen people, then it is also clear that others are not. The Puritan's view of themselves as a chosen people took on particular significance in this regard with respect to both Native

Americans and enslaved people. It simply never occurred to them to include anyone in the orbit of chosenness but themselves – white, English-speaking {Christians} and that is why they took such pains to exclude all people of color from their borders.”<sup>7</sup> This phenomena did not just happen in one town, in one church, for one month or year; this aura of being chosen superseded love of neighbor, the Golden Rule, for the majority of white Christian settlers from 1619 forward, state to state, generation to generation. Early white American Christians did not see indigenous or Black Americans as equal to them or made in God’s image.

Hughes explains that white America needed this basis to thrive. “Capitalism in the United States is unthinkable apart from the myth of White Supremacy, for its inception, growth, and development were built on stolen land and stolen people.”<sup>8</sup> Initially financed by Europe and supplied with boat after boat first of soldiers and settlers followed by boat after boat of enslaved peoples, after forcing out local indigenous nations, taking and building on their “free” land, white communities became among the wealthiest of the European colonies. Hughes invites us to consider for a moment what America would look like if whites did not envision themselves as chosen by God, if whites did not believe that Turtle Island was theirs for the taking provided by God, if whites did not support the kidnapping, trafficking, and enslavement of Africans, what indeed would America look like today?

Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* discusses how white people do not see race as a burden because it hasn’t been for most of their lives. They see themselves in leadership positions in church, in local, state, and national government, on television and movies, in professional careers as doctors, lawyers, judges, and

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<sup>7</sup> Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By: White Supremacy and the Stories that Give Us Meaning* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 42.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, *Myths*, 165.

teachers. White people tend to have no fear walking through stores, churches, restaurants, banks, or parks. Though it may be downplayed in modern times, there is still an air of chosenness in today's white American society. This perception shared by so many white Americans leads to white Americans feeling uncomfortable around people of color, not quite knowing how to interact. Could this be because the façade of chosenness is fading as the awareness of historic white supremacy becomes more clarified? This can be seen in mostly white congregations when a person or family of color joins worship on a Sunday morning. What is the reaction from the congregation: warmth and welcome, or a white usher who follows them around to see what they want or where they are going?

DiAngelo writes that when white people become uncomfortable being around people of color, or when whites are confronted with unpleasant truths about racism in America, white people tend to respond in these ways: “maintaining white solidarity, closing off discussion, trivializing the reality of racism, making white people the victim, changing the conversation, wanting to protect their children, wanting to protect white privilege, and rallying more white people to their defense.”<sup>9</sup> These behaviors have been playing out in school board meetings and library book banning meetings especially in 2023 and 2024. White Americans would prefer to protect their privilege than share equality and equity with their neighbors who simply want the same benefits.

In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi brings a new focus on micro-aggressions and cultural appropriations into the conversation about white complicity in perpetuating racial injustice. White church members need to be aware of micro-aggressions. These are racist words

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<sup>9</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 122.

or actions exhibited knowingly or unknowingly from whites against people of color, such as when a white person, “locks their door when a black person walks by, when a white person calls the police because she sees a black person walking in the same park, when black children are harassed for playing the same way white children play, and for assuming that black people are the help.” Society has started to look at micro-aggressions, but a deeper look would reveal that no matter the scale, each of these actions are a form of racism and abuse. Kendi says, “I detest the post-racial platform that supports its sudden popularity. The word abuse more accurately describes the action and its effects on people: distress, anger, worry, depression, anxiety, pain, fatigue, and suicide.”<sup>10</sup> Abuse is abuse, whether it is intentional or not, whether it comes from lack of awareness or not. Cultural appropriations fall into this category as well. The use of these phrases not only permeates church hallways but also is found daily on television shows, movies, and in conversations almost anywhere: off the reservation, let’s have a powwow to discuss this, he’s the low man on the totem pole, let’s all sit around and sing kumbaya. These phrases have no meaning or erroneous meaning for white people, but have deeper meaning for people of color who can be hurt by the misuse.

Robin DiAngelo’s *Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm* gives examples of how good-intentioned white people can still fall prey to not being helpful in seeking racial equality. She offers a list of questions for small group discussions for white people to consider their upbringing; how integrated were their neighborhoods, what percentage of their teachers were people of color, and how integrated was their church, their school, their workplace? Each of these situations influence one’s perception of the world around them. She provides “examples of behaviors that demonstrate white entitlement, ignorance, arrogance, and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 46.

protectionism: confusing one person for another of the same racial group; white people repeating / explaining what a person of color just said; touching, commenting on, marveling at, talking about a person of color's hair; a white person citing the example of one person of color who didn't mind what the white person did to invalidate them to another who did; calling a black person articulate or expressing surprise at their intelligence; a white person equating an oppression they experience when a person of color speaks about racism they have experienced; equating white ancestral experiences of immigration to black ancestral experiences of enslavement; recommending movies that have white saviors for black groups.”<sup>11</sup> Each of these actions, knowingly or unknowingly, can perpetuate racial injustice even for whites who feel that they are not racist and more so that they actively are striving to be antiracist. Being antiracist for a white person is a daily discipline focusing on one's words, actions, assumptions, and perceptions.

Jemar Tisby offers wonderful suggestions to white churches in his book *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice*. He says we need to start with awareness of racial injustice, then foster relationships between the races, and then commit to working together.<sup>12</sup> This aligns with the main purpose of my Major Project, that white churches first need to acknowledge that racism exists by becoming more aware before creating relationships and then working to bring down racist structures and systems. Other avenues can then be pursued: creating a task force, adopting a statement on racial justice, making sure your church budget reflects your strivings for racial equality and equity. There are plenty of

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<sup>11</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 45-47.

<sup>12</sup> Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 5.

books and resources encouraging white churches to be antiracist. Tisby is among the few to start by inviting white congregations to acknowledge racism exists.

Robert P. Jones' book *White Too Long* is instrumental in the development of my Major Project. He tells a remarkable story about a Baptist church in Macon, Georgia, that makes an uncomfortable discovery about its own past complicit racist actions that resulted in their benefit as a church. In the 1800s, the Baptist denomination was beginning to split over slavery. Soon after, Baptist churches became segregated. In Macon, First Baptist church split, but ended up after trial and error building two church buildings right next to each other; the whites went to one building and the blacks went to the other--for 128 years!<sup>13</sup> Then one day, a white church member started doing some research and made a major albeit painful discovery. "In a single week in 1855, the church accounts-receivable ledger detailed income from the sale of two teenage boy slaves for \$950 each, equivalent to about \$56,000 today. That same week, the accounts-payable ledger reflected a payment towards the pastor's salary and the church building fund."<sup>14</sup> Reality hit the white church leaders hard. Their former pastor and current church benefitted financially from the sale of enslaved people. The current pastor decided to go to the church with this news in the following Sunday's sermon. When he shared the news, there was an audible gasp in the sanctuary. Instantly, the church learned it had been complicit in racial injustice in its past. Imagining more white churches looking into their own histories and making their own painful yet honest discoveries about their founding inspired me to pursue this method for my Major Project. Every white church has a history. Not all of it is celebrational. Some acknowledgments need to be made, from indigenous lands that predate the church, to what

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<sup>13</sup> Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 201.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *White*, 205.

financial benefits the church has secured from the free labor of enslaved peoples, to Jim Crow laws, to segregation, to redlining, to civil rights, to Indian boarding schools, to local racial tensions.

### **Acknowledgment of Historical Racism in American Higher Education**

In *The Legacy of Slavery at Harvard*, this prestigious American educational institution describes a careful self-examination of the school's complicity in perpetuating racial injustice. This and similar studies can be a guide and an inspiration for white churches to research their own histories. The Harvard resource documents how other American educational institutions also went through this process leading to verbal, print, and in some ways through statues or inscriptions placed on campus, acknowledgments of their complicities. Among the schools listed are Brown University, Princeton, the University of Virginia, and Georgetown. The school "benefitted from land grants by the General Court, (the colonial legislature), from which the Pequot nation had been driven."<sup>15</sup> So the school did not purchase the land on which the institution now thrives and has enjoyed for centuries, nor did they compensate the Pequot nation. Harvard's reporting committee does recommend scholarships be granted to indigenous students.

In 2016, Drew Gilpin Faust, Harvard University's 28<sup>th</sup> president, publicly acknowledged that Harvard was directly complicit in America's system of racial bondage.<sup>16</sup> Among their discoveries was the realization that there were known names of unpaid enslaved laborers who worked in the home of two Harvard presidents.<sup>17</sup> The research showed that "slavery was integral at Harvard. Over nearly 150 years from the 1636 founding to 1783 Harvard presidents, faculty,

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<sup>15</sup> *The Legacy of Slavery at Harvard: Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Committee* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2022), 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Harvard*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Harvard*, 3.

and staff enslaved more than 70 individuals, who fed and cared for students. The University benefitted from extensive financial ties to slavery, accumulated wealth from slavery, which then allowed Harvard to hire faculty, support white students with scholarships, develop infrastructure, and helped it become a national institution.”<sup>18</sup> The book has several recommendations for future actions for the school to pursue from scholarships for descendants of enslaved persons if known to verbal and statutory acknowledgments on the campus of Harvard’s complicity.

### **Significance**

This project is significant currently for a number of important reasons, both for our nation as well as for the state of Christian churches--especially those that are predominately white. Let’s start with what this project is not. This project is not an in-depth work about racism, nor does it claim that all white churches are racist. Plenty of books and resources address racism in America. This project is not about white supremacy, nor does it claim that white churches are comprised of white supremacists. There are numerous books and resources about white supremacy. This project is not about Christian Nationalism, nor does it claim that all white churches are advocates of Christian Nationalism. And this project is not about white churches working to become anti-racist. Numerous good books and manuals are helping churches to work to become anti-racist. This project is none of these points.

Instead, this project invites white congregations on their own to look within their own histories no matter where they are located to discover, name, and acknowledge their own congregation’s complicity in perpetuating racial injustice. All churches have history. Most churches celebrate their history, often by creating pamphlets or websites noting when they were

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<sup>18</sup> *Harvard*, 6-7.

founded and celebrating the anniversary of their founding and/or when their building(s) were built, including pictures (if they exist) of church members and pastors turning over the first shovel-full of dirt and various stages of the building development, along with a list of clergy and the years they served, hard times, good times, and their status, location, and impact they have had in their community.

But most white congregations omit large portions of their actions or inactions in the retelling of their history. Some may not know. Some may know and may not want to share. But if white churches are to help our communities move towards racial harmony, equality, and equity, white churches first need to look within their own history to discover and/or acknowledge their complicity.

This project is unique in what it offers after giving a brief overview of the history of racism in America from the beginning with regard to stealing land and trying to erase the history and culture of indigenous Americans, and with regard to the human trafficked Africans brought against their will to build a nation that would intentionally work to hinder Black independence, wealth, equity, and equality, and after a brief overview of the historical complicity of white churches that participated in these atrocities. What makes the project unique is that it provides for churches a manual that includes numerous questions to spark small group and/or congregational discussion, to help white churches take a closer look at their history from the founding to their current expressions of complicity in perpetuating racial injustice.

The manual invites white congregations to acknowledge the land on which their building(s) stand and the indigenous nation(s) who originally lived and may currently live there now; to create connections with their indigenous neighbors, have conversations about the land and their culture, and create a positive relationship; and to discern if the church benefitted

financially from building on stolen / free land and/or if the local indigenous nation(s) were ever compensated for their land and the trauma of losing their homelands; and if there are ways for the white congregation to make reparations to the local indigenous nation(s) as part of their acknowledgment.

The manual further invites white congregations to discern if the congregation benefitted in any way, financially or otherwise, from the societal institution of slavery, from the sale of enslaved people, the unpaid labor of enslaved people, the societal institution of Jim Crow laws, community redlining of Black and Brown families away from white families, or from Black and Brown families being segregated away from better-funded schools, health-care, nutrition, etc. And the manual invites white congregations to discern making reparations to local people of color, schools, or organizations as part of their acknowledgment.

The significance of this project is that this is a unique opportunity for white churches to take a look at their church history, to look into the decisions their church made as a whole from the beginning of their ministry with regard to the people who lived on the land before they arrived, and then to see how their church responded (if at all) to racial injustice moments throughout their history, and how their church responds to racial injustice now.

### Chapter 3: Indigenous Culture and White Congregations

Family members of my indigenous in-laws have told me they are not interested in how or when their peoples arrived here. They are not interested in what some academics believe about a miraculous crossing of the Bering Straits thousands of years ago. “The question of where the American Indian came from has fascinated Europeans since Columbus’ time.... Perhaps the most popular theory was the belief that the Indians were the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel. That the Indians, including the Aleuts and the Eskimos, came originally from Asia is almost universally accepted”<sup>1</sup>--accepted by academics, but not by the indigenous peoples themselves. It is ostentatious to assume that the origin of indigenous Americans is a lost tribe of Israel. Indigenous Americans are not “lost” nor are they a mystical or nostalgic throwback to a time of legend. Instead, they are people, rich in cultural heritage, separated by language, geography, nationality, and traditions, yet united in their connection to each other, to the land, and to their faith. Their origin stories reflect always being here, on the continent they call Turtle Island, referring to the creation story that the land grew from a turtle’s back.<sup>2</sup> Many tribal names, for instance, reflect this: Anishnaabe means “original people,” Dine means “the people,” Hopi means “peaceful people,” Inuit means “the people,” Lakota means “the allies,” Wampanoag means “eastern people.”<sup>3</sup> The Americas have been populated for at least 20,000 years.<sup>4</sup> Over time, each nation has evolved, some creating large cities, some creating mounds or

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<sup>1</sup> Wilcomb E Washburn, *The Indian in America* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Benton-Banai, *Mishomis*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> “Original Tribal Names of Native North American People,” Native-Languages, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.native-languages.org/original.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> David E Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 10.

structures lasting thousands of years, still others simply sustaining and maintaining their way of life.

In my travels around the country, I have experienced an unwritten social commentary where people say there was “nothing here” before Columbus arrived. Some, coming from a place of privilege and/or white supremacy, have stated that the peoples living in America before the Pilgrims arrived were savages who were uneducated, uncivilized, hunter-gatherers. How soon we forget our primary and secondary education classes teaching us about the great accomplishments of the Aztec, the Inca, and the Olmec peoples. “Cortes’ chronicler in 1519 said of the city of Iztapalapa ‘the appearances of the palaces.... How spacious and well-built they were, of beautiful stonework and cedar wood... awnings of cotton cloth. Great canoes were able to pass into the garden from the lake through an opening that had been made so that there was no need for their occupants to land.’”<sup>5</sup> At its ancient height around 1000 CE, Central Mexico had over 25 million people and on any given day, 200,000 boats sailed for pleasure or commerce on the Lake of the Moon.<sup>6</sup> “The Olmec civilization was the earliest Mesoamerican culture from around 1200 BCE, known especially for carving 9-foot tall heads out of basalt rock.”<sup>7</sup> Cahokia, near St. Louis, at its greatest was larger than modern San Francisco, including a giant mound whose base is larger than the Great Pyramid at Giza, Egypt. With a population of 40,000, Cahokia flourished 2000 years ago. The mound and other markers can still be visited today.<sup>8</sup> The Mayans thrived from 800 BCE to around 900 CE<sup>9</sup> and the Aztec dominated from the 1300’s CE to the 1500’s CE.<sup>10</sup> “Pueblo culture flourished including the construction of large ceremonial

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<sup>5</sup> Stannard, *Holocaust*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Stannard, *Holocaust*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart J. Fiedel, *Prehistory of the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 260.

<sup>8</sup> Stannard, *Holocaust*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Fiedel, *Prehistory*, 294.

<sup>10</sup> Fiedel, *Prehistory*, 301.

chambers known as kivas. By 1000 CE villages were numerous and agriculture was the means of subsistence.”<sup>11</sup>

The indigenous peoples of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys were mound builders. Most often they were built for burials, but sometimes they formed huge effigies of serpents, birds, bears, and other animals. There are estimated to be around 100,000 mounds in the United States though some were destroyed during colonization.<sup>12</sup> There are a series of mounds in the town where I grew up; the nearby road is Indian Mounds Drive, indicating to me that since the founding of the town in 1833, the white settlers knew about the mounds and named the street as a reminder of indigenous existence that obviously predated the white settlers’ arrival.

I now live one county west of where I grew up. The county name, Ottawa, is the English version of the indigenous word Odawa, one of the tribal nations from this area. Likewise, the name of the state where I live, Michigan, is also an indigenous word from the Algonquin language meaning “big lake.” Michigan was founded in 1837. “In 1836, the Treaty of Washington was an agreement between the US government and the Anishinabek peoples who granted a large portion of northwestern lower Michigan and the Eastern part of the upper peninsula to the US in return for permanent reservation lands and access to natural resources including hunting and fishing rights.”<sup>13</sup> Sadly, the United States broke this treaty and took what is now the entire land known as Michigan to create the 26<sup>th</sup> state of the union. Indigenous cultures thrived in the Americas for thousands of years until the arrival of conquistadors, explorers, and settlers from Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> Washburn, *Indian*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Washburn, *Indian*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> “How Michigan Became a State,” Mackinac Parks, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://mackinacparks.com/how-michigan-became-a-state-the-treaty-of-washington-1836/>.

One of the myths of early Americana is that white colonists lived peaceably with their indigenous neighbors. While there may have been attempts to do so, white culture demanded authority from the moment the colonists stepped onto American soil. White culture assumed superiority over indigenous cultures already here as well as the millions of enslaved peoples brought to these shores close to the same time as the settlers.<sup>14</sup> “Wherever Columbus planted a cross and made the required declarations, he claimed the land for his royal patrons in Spain. Since he spoke in Spanish, the local indigenous peoples had no idea what Columbus was saying. But here is what he said again and again: “I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church. We shall take you and your wives and your children and shall make slaves of them.... And we shall take your goods and shall do you all the mischief and damage we can, to all who do not obey and refuse to receive their lord and resist and contradict them.”<sup>15</sup> This is not the pleasant myth told time and again of white settlers befriending local natives. At the conclusion of his first voyage, Columbus abducted 400 indigenous peoples and attempted to bring them back to Spain. Sadly, fewer than 10 survived. Columbus’ second voyage began the invasion of America with 17 ships, 1,200 soldiers, and 6 priests in 1494. They also brought with them influenza that wiped out one third of the Spanish arrivals and great numbers of local indigenous peoples who had never been exposed to this illness.<sup>16</sup> This reality informs the decision to move away from celebrating Columbus Day and instead recognize the existence and contributions of indigenous peoples.

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<sup>14</sup> Wise, *America*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Stannard, *Holocaust*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> Stannard, *Holocaust*, 67-68.

As European nations both prepared for westward exploration as well as initiated the scourge of kidnapping and trafficking enslaved Africans, the Catholic church partnered with European national leaders from 1452 to 1493 by creating the Doctrine of Discovery. These statements “authorized colonial powers to seize lands and subjugate people in Africa and the New World as long as people on the lands were not Christian.”<sup>17</sup> Seizing lands and subjugating people who were not Christian in the name of the church defines the complicity of the church in creating racial injustice from the earliest days of European colonialism in America. Complicity continued in almost every facet of the newly dawning American society from government to churches to education. For example, Harvard was founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1636. The school “benefitted from land grants by the General Court, (the colonial legislature), from which the Pequot nation had been driven.”<sup>18</sup> Creating an internationally renowned educational institution is quite a bit more easily achieved when one does not need to pay for the land. Further complicity came from the church when just 14 years after its founding, local Puritans began paying Harvard to educate and Christianize indigenous peoples to make them more “civilized” in 1650.<sup>19</sup>

As a continuation of the Doctrine of Discovery, the Indian Removal Act of Congress in 1830 abolished all indigenous government, took by force, land previously contracted by purchase or treaty, removed all indigenous people, and relocated many to Oklahoma including the nations of the Creek, Choctaw, Cherokee, Seminole, and Chickasaw.<sup>20</sup> In June 2021, on my ministerial sabbatical, I travelled to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, one of the terminations of the Trails of Tears. At

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<sup>17</sup> Bill Chappell, “The Vatican Repudiates ‘Doctrine of Discovery,’ Which Was Used to Justify Colonialism,” NPR, March 30, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/30/1167056438/vatican-doctrine-of-discovery-colonialism-indigenous>.

<sup>18</sup> *Harvard*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Harvard*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Debo, *History*, 117, 125.

the Cherokee National Museum, I learned that 16,000 Cherokee--men, women, and children--were force-marched from their homeland of North Carolina all the way to Oklahoma, some 850 miles. Four thousand Cherokee did not survive the walk. Another trail brought indigenous peoples southwest to Oklahoma through Illinois and Missouri. The path was so well known that it later became a highway known no longer for the tragedy in American history but repurposed into Route 66. This became an emotionally raw enlightenment for my wife and me as we travelled along Route 66 towards Oklahoma. Our intent was to go to Tahlequah to learn more about the Trail of Tears. At the time, we didn't even know there were multiple trails, and we certainly did not know that one of the trails later became Route 66. How painful to know that the very road we were driving in air-conditioned comfort with numerous roadside stands created for tourism was the same route on which countless thousands of indigenous peoples were force-marched -- with no historical marker of the traumatic events that preceded the famous Route. How many other trails of tears became highways without markers slowly erasing this tragic part of American history? American governmental policies continued to perpetuate injustices against indigenous Americans. In 1871, Congress passed a law terminating the negotiation of treaties with indigenous tribes. From then on, the government could, as the Doctrine of Discovery asserted, take land, and relocate indigenous peoples.<sup>21</sup>

From the mid-1800s to the 1900s, complicity in perpetuating racial injustice specifically with indigenous peoples took an even more depraved turn with the creation of the Indian boarding schools. The goal of Native boarding schools was cultural genocide. The United States government and religious institutions used compulsory education to force young Native Americans to give up the languages and ways of their ancestors which were considered inferior

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<sup>21</sup> Debo, *History*, 294.

to Christianity. Located across the United States and Canada, these schools were underfunded, crowded, and disease-ridden, and, in conjunction with torture from teachers, resulted in the deaths of thousands of children. Of the 367 known boarding schools in the United States, 100 were run by the Catholic church, several by Protestant denominations, and others by the government. The first Indian boarding school was created in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1879. Eighty-six Lakota Sioux children and youth were brought from the Dakotas. Upon arrival, the traditional long hair of both girls and boys, which was of spiritual and cultural importance to indigenous peoples was cut short. In addition to being forced to learn English, children also were forced to do manual labor at local farms. They were not allowed to go home for summer breaks. Physical and sexual abuse were commonplace.<sup>22</sup>

For part of my ministerial sabbatical, on July 23, 2022, I travelled to Carlisle, Pennsylvania. I toured the Cumberland County Museum which has a land acknowledgment that the peoples of the Susquehannock were the first peoples in the region before colonization. A profound, wall-sized photograph of students at the boarding school from 1892 shows around 400 unhappy, shorn, indigenous children and youth in uniforms facing the camera outside on the school grounds. Later that day, my wife and I drove past the school grounds where you can clearly see the nearly 200 identical headstones marking the graves of the children and youth whose lives ended at the school. Schools should not have cemeteries. There was no mention of the cemetery at the museum. I began to wonder how any nearby Christian churches that existed at the time of the boarding school in Carlisle might have reacted. And then I began to wonder about the reactions of any church near any Indian boarding school when they were in existence. Were they supportive, opposed, or silent? The closest Indian boarding school to where I grew up

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<sup>22</sup> *The Week*, August 27, 2021, 11.

was 75 miles away; did churches that were founded around the same time support or oppose it? Were the churches in existence at the same time as Indian boarding schools complicit in the injustices inflicted upon the children who were taken from their families? Would white churches be willing to explore their own history to figure this out or would they choose not to, based upon discomfort?

Currently, some in society are trying to limit or eliminate from public schools, universities, and public libraries American historical references regarding race, that they claim make white children and parents uncomfortable. This complicity in perpetuating racial injustice takes the form of nostalgia, amnesia, and intentionality to distort or forget the injustices of the past. “The tempting thing about the mood of sentimental nostalgia/resentment/urgency is its precondition: forgetfulness. What Patriots forget is that the ‘sister’ of nostalgia (to use Carl Jung’s term) is brutality. Christian Patriots are blind to the despoliations, enslavements, rapes, and murders of the past that have provided them with the rights and privileges they enjoy today.” Any rendering of American history that frames the country’s founding as sacred and perfect is erasing the “brutality” of conquest and slavery on which the country was built.<sup>23</sup>

This amnesia / nostalgia is well illustrated by the fascinating and often erroneous portrayal of Pocahontas. At the Jamestown Settlement Museum in Virginia I visited, there is an immersion portion where you can interact with local indigenous volunteers who tell you about their ancestral and current ways. Other volunteers tell the history of the Jamestown settlement, dating back to 1607. When we were there, we watched a young man working on the craft of

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<sup>23</sup> James Aho, *Far-Right Fantasy: A Sociology of American Religion and Politics* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 44-45.

making a canoe. This is an arduous task that takes great skill. While we watched, a young white girl walked up and said, “Are you a real Indian?” Imagine the generational trauma this young man felt having to answer a question from a girl who may not have known better, but a question that is borne out of years of a white society claiming that Indians no longer exist. To what other race in America could such a question be asked? Inside the museum, the education continues, especially delving into the real story of Pocahontas, whose real name was Matoaka.

“Pocahontas” was a nickname her father gave her, meaning “playful.” Matoaka was born in 1595; she was 12 when the settlers arrived in 1607 and she met John Smith. Her people, the Powhatan, fought with the English for four years, during which time Matoaka was captured. She was held captive for a year, forced to learn English, was baptized, and renamed Rebecca. She married John Rolfe at age 18 and died four years later of an unnamed illness at age 22. Think about how Pocahontas is memorialized in Americana set against the real story of Matoaka. What parts of her story are left out? What parts are glorified? Why is her story told and glamorized the way it is? Does her story feel different to you knowing she was married as a teenager and died at age 22 all within the first years of European settlement?

Released in 2023, the movie, “Killers of the Flower Moon,” tells the true story of indigenous Americans who had been force-marched into Oklahoma, who then discover oil on their land. Overnight, the Osage peoples become among the richest people in the world. Soon after, white Americans appear in droves, first to attempt to cash in and second to take the land rights by theft, rape, and murder. “All Osage allottees shared in the undivided wealth, virtually the entire income of the tribe was plundered there. Even murder was systematically employed to channel the inheritance of the headrights into the conspirator’s hands – 24 unsolved cases including shooting, poisoning, and blowing up a house from 1921-1925... But government

supervision of the Indian's property was destructive. The destruction of Indian tribal government, the liquidation of tribal organization and tribal property, and the hostility to all Indian ways and culture that characterized so much of Government policy now appears to have been a mistake.”<sup>24</sup> How is it that the US government forced the Osage nation to Oklahoma and then after oil is discovered there, looked the other way, allowing greed to be the rule of law? Even now, 100 years after the Osage Nation negotiated with the US government to place rights into a trust to keep the mineral rights in Osage members' ownership, nearly one quarter of shares are owned by non-Osage entities, including “oil companies, churches, trusts, and universities.”<sup>25</sup> Any white / non-Osage church that benefits financially from shares of the Osage oil mineral rights is complicit in perpetuating racial injustice.

What happens to American society when the injustices of the past are no longer taught? The impact of collective amnesia, nostalgia, and gaslighting renders the indigenous American invisible and unimportant in the story of our nation and promotes the false narrative that white Americans simply flourished into a wealthy powerhouse without mention of building on free or stolen land, forcing indigenous nations all across the countryside, attempting to erase indigenous culture, language, and identity, and culminating in the complicity of perpetuating racial injustice both from the Church and secular society. It is essential for white churches to recognize the history of their land, to ask how it came into their ownership, what connections their church had with the indigenous peoples in their area, if payment was ever made to the original owners of church land, what broken treaties helped the church appropriate their land, what generational

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<sup>24</sup> Debo, *History*, 334.

<sup>25</sup> Rachel Adams-Heard and Allison Herrera, “*Who Gets Osage Oil Money? A List From BIA Raises New Questions*,” Bloomberg, September 6, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-06/who-get-osage-oil-money-a-list-from-us-raises-new-questions>

trauma has been inflicted on the local indigenous peoples surrounding the church, what response if any that the church had to local Indian boarding schools, how has the church historically or currently been complicit in perpetuating racial injustice with regard to local indigenous peoples. These questions and more will be addressed in the manual.

## Chapter 4: White Church Culture

The focus of this chapter is on white church culture, specifically with regard to how white churches tend to have intertwined myths and storylines about their own propensity toward greatness. This belief is based upon a false narrative passed from generation to generation of a foundation in America that was pre-ordained by God, who gave them land and opportunity to spread the Gospel. They accepted this belief without taking into consideration either the indigenous peoples who already lived here or how using labor from enslaved people both benefited the church and made them complicit in perpetuating racial injustice. Richard Hughes defines this well: “If one imagines one’s tribe or clan or nation as a chosen people, then it is also clear that others are not. The Puritan’s view of themselves as a chosen people took on particular significance in this regard with respect to both Native Americans and enslaved people. It simply never occurred to them to include anyone in the orbit of chosenness but themselves – white, English-speaking {Christians} and that is why they took such pains to exclude all people of color from their borders.”<sup>1</sup> The irony of this is that, though many of the early European settlers in America were Christians who were seeking freedom from persecution or seeking a fresh start, the majority looked past the pain of their own persecutions in Europe and created their own persecutions in America against indigenous peoples. Additionally, how did they not see or how did they intentionally ignore the persecution and enslavement of Africans for the purpose of seeking free labor, without seeing the pain and trauma they were inflicting? Each of these egregious actions were choices by white Christian Americans who took them as an opportunity to flourish due to their own inability to see or acknowledge their inhumanity. That inability or unwillingness of those early Christian settlers to see their inhumanity seems either naïve (if they

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, *Myths*, 42.

simply didn't think about it or intolerant if their intentions were clear). "John Cotton defended the Puritan occupation of Native American lands in the following terms: 'Where there is a vacant place, there is liberty for the son of Adam or Noah to come and inhabit, though they neither buy it nor ask their leaves. In a vacant soil, he that taketh possession of it, and bestoweth culture and husbandry upon it, his right it is.'"<sup>2</sup> However, the American myth of vacant land is based on either blindness or racism or both. The first European settlers to what would become Jamestown, Virginia, met indigenous peoples immediately who had settled the land previously for millennia. The same was true for the Puritans who arrived in what later became known as the New England area. And as previously stated in Chapter Two, Turtle Island was not vacant; rather, countless nations from the ancient Inca, Aztec, and Maya, to the Cherokee, Ojibwe, and Odawa had settled South, Central, and North America tens of thousands of years before the arrival of white Europeans. To not acknowledge the existence of indigenous culture, if intentional, is racist.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the Church used proclamations of the Doctrine of Discovery from Rome to declarations from Columbus that the "discovered" land was to be granted by God to the European settlers. These words meant nothing to the indigenous peoples whose faith informed them that God gave them the land to cultivate. Instead, for centuries, settlers continued to take land by force from the indigenous peoples, all in God's name. "The term manifest destiny appeared for the first time in an unsigned article in the July-August 1845 issue of the Democratic Review exploring the annexation of Texas to the United States, 'our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions. White Americans had come to believe from the beginning the myth of the

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<sup>2</sup> Hughes, *Myths*, 43.

United States being a Christian nation,”<sup>3</sup> and therefore free for development. Any person arriving from Europe, however, knew that the American land was not free because they knew that European wealth was established through purchase and resale of land. Land in America was not free, it was stolen; and soon after the theft was complete, selling began without ever compensating the land’s original owners. This happened again and again, pushing indigenous peoples further and further west. Christian principles were set aside in God’s name for theft, greed, and the ability to amass personal wealth. “Capitalism in the United States is unthinkable apart from the myth of White Supremacy, for its inception, growth, and development were built on stolen land and stolen people.”<sup>4</sup> These goals placed white Christians ahead first of indigenous peoples and later enslaved peoples by not acknowledging either as citizens or landowners.

White Christians may wish to tell themselves that their ancestors were naïve, but this is not the case. “Churches participated fully in the taking of land and in the massacres of indigenous peoples, not only as they settled comfortably in eastern cities and rural farmlands but also as they traveled westward with pioneer wagons. They provided theological support for the belief that Native American peoples were not human, and that genocide was an acceptable action.”<sup>5</sup> White churches intentionally participated in their establishment using the Doctrine of Discovery, the belief that they were superior, and that God wanted white Christians to thrive. The church that I serve was founded in 1877. It is the first and oldest church in the town that was founded in 1873. The State of Michigan was founded in January 1837, just 35 years earlier. What I ask myself is, what compensation--if any--did the founders of my town pay the indigenous peoples who were living in the area as Michigan was being colonized? Indigenous peoples were living here then.

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes, *Myths*, 143.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, *Myths*, 165.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Barndt, *Becoming an Anti-Racist Church: Journeying Toward Wholeness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 39.

What were those conversations like between white settlers and the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa nations in the 1800s? White congregations can't naively believe that the land their churches built upon was vacant. If the land had been cleared due to forcing indigenous peoples out, this injustice is in addition to not compensating the previous owners for their land—which itself is against the Fifth Amendment. This amendment states in part that private property shall not be taken for public use without just compensation. In the manual, I propose that white congregations consider what a just compensation would be for land where their church building(s) rest if they were to make amends with the local indigenous leadership. Compensation can take many forms from financial payments to creating scholarships for indigenous youth to creating a relationship to discover the needs of the indigenous neighbors. Doing nothing continues complicity in perpetuating racial injustice.

White Christians' American Christian origin myths continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "The legal exclusion of Black people, in addition to illegal acts of terrorism against them such as lynching, continued all the way through to the 1960's. Black people were denied the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) housing loans in the 1950's that allowed a generation of white people to attain middle-class status through home ownership. Home ownership is crucial in the US because it is how the average person builds and passes wealth to the next generation."<sup>6</sup> These practices could no longer be attributed to naivety or being unaware of the impact made on indigenous / people of color. Rather these practices became intentional ways to grant wealth and status to white Americans over all others. "Although reproduced in new form in every era, the possessive investment in whiteness has always been influenced by its origins in the racialized history of the United States by its legacy of slavery and segregation, of indigenous extermination

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<sup>6</sup> DiAngelo, *Nice Racism*, 29.

and immigrant restriction, of conquest and colonialism.”<sup>7</sup> When white Christians and congregations continue to ignore their past actions, ignore indigenous peoples in their communities, and turn a blind eye to their complicity in keeping people of color behind in wealth development in their own and surrounding communities, white Christians continue the cycle in the current era.

What would it have been like in America if these actions had not taken place when the white Christians first arrived? “In her important book, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, Carol Anderson asks us to imagine what the United States might look like today if, instead of resisting racial equality and equal opportunity for people of color for so much of American history, the nation had actually worked to realize those ideals: imagine if Reconstruction had actually honored the citizenship of four million freed people--provided education, autonomy.”<sup>8</sup> While it may be hard to imagine an America that actually held fast to its ideals of freedom for all from day one, white churches can take steps to look within their own history, discover through research their complicity, and take action steps to work toward a time of true appreciation and love of all neighbors.

Joseph Barndt helps showcase how white Americans over time have used these myths to forward their own wealth creation. He first references individualism, using the tired phrase of pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps. White Americans often follow this up by saying if they could do it, anyone can; yet this reflects superiority and ease of attaining status and wealth. This assumption also ignores societal limitations that have restricted people of color from advancement in numerous ways. First, redlining people of color into less desirable neighborhoods where homes do not appreciate over time makes the passing of wealth from one

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<sup>7</sup> Rothenberg, *Privilege*, 69.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, *Myths*, 1.

generation to the next less possible. Redlining often is also associated with lower funding in those neighborhoods for education, preventing advancement for children and youth. Redlining also often means a lack of jobs as well as a lack of affordable nutritious foods, with cheaper fast food offered instead, which creates poor health. Many of these intentional society systems create frustration, which can lead to anger and/or crime, further setting back people who just want to get ahead like the rest of the population. Redlining is an intentional creation from white culture to keep people of color from advancing. White churches often respond to the needs of redlined communities with food and clothing drives, funding and/or volunteering at soup kitchens, offering tutoring for children either at their schools or hosted at the church, collecting and donating books to schools, creating community gardens on church property or vacant lots near the red lined community. But some churches respond by locking their church doors, installing security cameras, and/or hiring security guards at the church to protect the building and parishioners from the community. Neither of these responses from white churches fix the systemic community problem of redlining, however; instead, they are just reactionary ministries. To solve the problem, the system needs to be changed. White churches need to decide if they really want to fix the racist policy of redlining or be complicit in perpetuating the situation.

People of color are restricted from picking themselves up by their bootstraps in other ways as well. One is not affording them loans. “The GI Bill, seen as one of the greatest opportunities for the establishment of the middle class was not shared with black veterans, which gave whites another upper hand.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, ways of making voting difficult or even inaccessible range from having polling stations open only for one day, to restricting absentee ballots, to gerrymandering districts, to not hiring enough poll workers, creating hours-long lines

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<sup>9</sup> Tisby, *Compromise*, 123.

for voters, to not allowing people in line to sit or have food or water. Each of these tactics are created intentionally to keep people of color from having a voice in their future.

Another restriction to advancement is the use of micro-aggressions. Ibram Kendi describes these as racist words or actions exhibited knowingly or not from whites against people of color. Examples are when a white person “locks their door when a black person walks by, when a white person calls the police because she sees a black person walking in the same park, when black children are harassed for playing the same way white children play, and for assuming that black people are the help.”<sup>10</sup> Kendi opposes using the word micro-aggressions. He calls any form of racism abuse.

An additional restriction to advancement is the forced placement of indigenous peoples onto reservations. Essentially, this is a version of redlining by creating intentional oppression, but this time of a nation, often on land that is untillable and lacking resources, jobs, education, health care, and nutritious foods. This leads to the potential for unrest, arrest, incarceration, and further restrictions for equality.

Each of these restrictions and many others are systemic forms of racism. White churches need to acknowledge these oppressive systems and then decide if they will continue to address the symptoms or work to change the systems seeking equality for all their neighbors. Barndt describes as charity in the place of justice when white churches help in small ways without working to end the larger problems of hunger, homelessness, poverty, racism, oppression, and inequality.

Barndt references the myth of justification of riches when white Christians talk about wealth as being a blessing from God. This implies that the poor are not blessed, that God has left them

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<sup>10</sup> Kendi, *Antiracist*, 48.

behind. In other words, the poor have done something wrong, are less deserving, are not trying hard enough, and are to blame for their condition. He says, “we would be shocked to hear a purse snatcher describe his booty as a blessing from God, but it is acceptable religious language for us to describe our country as a gift from God, despite the fact that what we call our land was stolen from indigenous peoples,” and the free labor from enslaved peoples helped build wealth for white Americans for generations.<sup>11</sup> Myths that everyone in America can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and find equal access to wealth, that churches are helping with charity without changing the systemic oppression of people of color, and the belief that wealth equals blessing from God do not reflect Jesus’ call to love our neighbor--and they contribute to the ongoing suppression of people of color by white congregations.

Another problem is when white congregations feel that they are aware of racism and want to act out against it, but inadvertently perpetuate racism anyway. Many white people think they are not racist. “The idea that there are enlightened, racially aware white people rests on the idea that racism is a simple formula: conscious prejudice + intentional meanness = racism. This definition beautifully protects systemic racism by exempting virtually all white people. The workplace is rife with unconscious racism: talking over or silencing people of color in meetings, ignoring or taking credit for their ideas, assuming people of color are inherently unqualified diversity hires; pressure on black people to keep white people comfortable including challenging hairstyles, language, clothing, and culture; inequities in promotions, off-loading diversity work to people of color.”<sup>12</sup> Certainly, not all white people have the same access to wealth as others, but all white people do have systemic, historic, and economic advantages over people of color.

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<sup>11</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> DiAngelo, *Nice Racism*, 38-39.

These advantages, whether they are acknowledged, ignored, or simply not seen, find their way into everyday life conversations in the workplace, at church, and in the community.

“Examples of behaviors that demonstrate white entitlement, ignorance, arrogance, and protectionism: confusing one person for another of the same racial group; white people repeating / explaining what a person of color just said; touching, commenting on, marveling at, talking about a person of color’s hair; a white person citing the example of one person of color who didn’t mind what the white person did to invalidate them to another who did; calling a black person articulate or expressing surprise at their intelligence; a white person equating an oppression they experience when a person of color speaks about racism they have experienced; equating white ancestral experiences of immigration to black ancestral experiences of enslavement; recommending movies that have white saviors for black groups; not understanding why something on this list is problematic and rather than seeking education, just dismissing it as invalid.”<sup>13</sup> White people choosing to be anti-racist is a daily challenge of awareness of privilege, paying attention to words and phrases that are not an appropriation of another’s culture, and not using micro-aggressions whether aware in the moment or not. One progressive white action where people think they are being helpful or nice, but perpetuates racial harm is credentialing by saying phrases like: I don’t see color; my best friend is Black; I was taught to see everyone as the same. The intention may be to try to establish that they are not racist, but it conveys acknowledgment of difference as well as invalidates people of color by not seeing their race, culture, language, or gender.<sup>14</sup>

Part of the battle of awareness versus ignorance of perpetuating racial injustice in the white church is due to theological differences and goals. “Not everyone in the church agrees with the

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<sup>13</sup> DiAngelo, *Nice Racism*, 45-47.

<sup>14</sup> DiAngelo, *Nice Racism*, 59.

premise that justice belongs at the center of the Biblical message.... Some even believe that such “earthly matters” are totally unrelated to and irrelevant to the gospel... In the United States... the theological subjects of sin, salvation, and eternal life are all too often dealt with as purely spiritual matters and are kept separated and segregated from the secondary concerns of social issues and charity. There is no clearer example of this than the tragic reality that the church has stood just as often on the side of those who endorse racism as it has been on the side of those who struggle against it.”<sup>15</sup> Part of this reality is based on white churches that choose to remain silent when racial injustice abounds around them as well as those who do not pursue anti-racism ideology. In order to see their complicity in perpetuating racial injustice, white congregations need to acknowledge the indigenous peoples who lived on what was their land before the church built there, to have open communication with the local indigenous peoples, not for the sake of evangelism but rather for community building, and to acknowledge the myths of easy advancement and that white culture has had historic advantages not extended to people of color. Finally, white congregations need to look more closely within their church identity and history to see how they have reacted to racism around them in the past and how they react to racist acts in their community today.

Another way to look at this is from the white perspective. Robin DiAngelo suggests that white people do not see their race as a burden. They see people who look like them as lead characters in movies, television shows, and plays, or as news anchors, teachers, professors, doctors, lawyers, judges, policemen, or politicians. White people can walk into stores, churches, banks, courts, virtually any institution without concern for being followed or pursued. White people have the freedom to travel and can stay in any hotel or town. White people often refer to

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<sup>15</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 15.

the past as the good old days, yet upon reflection, most of the past in America has not been good for people of color: “Enslavement of millions of Africans, theft of indigenous land and forced removal of indigenous peoples to reservations, lynchings, Chinese exclusion laws, Japanese internment camps, Jim Crow laws of mandatory segregation, bans on black jury service, voting restrictions, imprisonment for people of color, medical sterilization or experimentation, biased laws and policing practices, cultural erasures, untold historical accounts”--these and many more examples showcase why the good old days are better for whites than for people of color.<sup>16</sup>

White churches need to recognize the freedoms they enjoy as privileges that other races do not. Until everyone has equal access to each of these freedoms, we will not all be free.

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<sup>16</sup> DiAngelo, *Fragility*, 59.

## **Chapter 5: White Church Complicity in Racism**

This chapter will explore how white churches knowingly or unknowingly participated in and perpetuated racial injustice from the beginning of our nation's history. A list of these events include but are not limited to: not acknowledging or ever paying for land stolen from indigenous peoples; participating in and/or benefiting economically from the unpaid labor and/or sales of enslaved peoples; ensuring white success from the great exodus of whites from urban areas into the suburbs; race-controlling through red lined areas, intentionally causing failure to thrive for people of color by limiting equal access to housing and opportunities for educational advancement; thriving in prime land acquisition and building expansions; and enriching the churches via white members whose wealth was generated or positively improved generationally from inheritances that benefited from stolen land and/or the labor and sales of enslaved peoples.

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to fade, a serious and coordinated national effort to purge uncomfortable but true stories of American history in public schools and libraries. However, as George Santayana said, "Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it." This is true for the church as well. To prevent repeating the atrocities of our American past, white congregations need to take a closer look in the mirror, learn how their founding led to racial injustice, and acknowledge those facts. This will help the churches prepare for striving to strengthen racial harmony in our own communities. Stories of the church's involvement in racism may be difficult for many to read and discuss. Our instincts are to protect the church by countering negative stories with positive ones. White congregations must, however, become acquainted with this shameful side of our history, no matter how hard it is to do so. Part of the difficulty is that a significant amount of this history has been forgotten or deliberately erased. In history books about American churches written largely by white leaders of churches and

denominations, references to white supremacy often are omitted on purpose. These include the sanctioning of genocide against indigenous Americans, the enslavement of Africans, and the Church's silence when it could and should have been the voice of justice for all humanity. Some apologies have been made, but words do not do justice to the centuries of suffering and the systemic racism that has been established, and in which the church has played a role. Yet, if we are to reclaim a place of integrity with an anti-racist gospel and an anti-racist church, it is important to reverse the denials that this sacrilege was committed in God's name.<sup>1</sup>

The uncomfortable truth is that white churches have worked intentionally to rise above peoples of color since the founding of the United States and from the first arrivals on the east coast. "Following independence, churches began preaching a gospel of divine providence that blessed the creation of a new nation. They compared the crossing of the Atlantic to God leading the Hebrew peoples across the Jordan."<sup>2</sup> Stories of divine providence for white European arrivals while at the same time then condemning the indigenous peoples already living here, as well as the black Africans who were kidnapped and trafficked across the same waters to the same purported land of freedom and God's blessings, are an anathema to our Christian ideologies. This is like the uncomfortable telling of the story of God blessing the Hebrew peoples with land in Israel that had belonged to and was developed for millennia by the Palestinians. Trafficked Africans, invaded indigenous Americans, and pre-Israeli Palestinians had their own faiths, their own cultures, their own hopes and dreams, their own freedoms, all taken from them in the name of the Hebrew / Christian God. Often white Americans will quote Napoleon Bonaparte, who said, "History is written by the winners," as if the atrocities carried out by white colonists from 1607 until today are sacrosanct. American white Christian churches need to be aware of our

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<sup>1</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 38.

<sup>2</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 45.

role in putting these racist policies into place, in the name of Christian freedoms, and at the expense of so many innocent lives.

To acknowledge complicity is not just acknowledging the manner of European Christians' arrival, actions taken against indigenous Americans, and their benefitting from the trafficking of enslaved black Africans; white Christians also must acknowledge their use of the Bible to support their ideology of superiority. In the colonial days of the early American church, "defenders of slavery noted that in the Bible, Abraham had slaves. ... Paul returned a slave, Philemon, to his master... and that Jesus never spoke out against it."<sup>3</sup> Some churches, clergy, and early denominations were abolitionists, but many more fully endorsed slavery and used enslaved people to the church's benefit. And even the abolitionist churches still benefitted from the economic gains of free or stolen land for their churches as well as the trade generated by the free labor of enslaved peoples. It continues to astonish me that early colonial Christians could absolve themselves of wrongdoing by saying that since slavery was practiced in Biblical times, God must be supportive of slavery. How did they not see that God also set free the Hebrew peoples from slavery in Egypt? One early purpose of the Christian colonial church was to save souls, not bodies. "To counter any tendency to associate freedom in Christ with freedom from slavery, laws were passed in most colonies preventing enslaved people from using their Christian identity as a legal argument for being released."<sup>4</sup> This shows that white Christians knew that what they were doing was wrong when they adopted laws preventing enslaved Africans from being set free either as a citizen or by spiritual renewal in the same way white Christians celebrated their own freedoms. If colonial white Christians really believed that God brought them here safely from Europe to pursue freedom of religion and a new life, how could they teach

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<sup>3</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 40.

<sup>4</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 41.

that God did not extend that same providence upon indigenous Americans or trafficked black Africans? How could they then put laws in place to keep enslaved Africans from enjoying the freedom of new life in Christ Jesus?

Going one step further, “most denominations found ways to tolerate or openly permit their clergy and members to own slaves, to take ownership of Indian lands, and to exclude people of color from membership or to segregate them and treat them as second-class members.”<sup>5</sup> This is complicity. What seems impossible today, was standard in the early days of American colonialism in the Christian church. How could a Christian pastor not see the hypocrisy of owning enslaved people? How could a congregation knowingly plant a church on property they did not purchase? How did denominations not see the complicity? The fact that we can see this today invites us to acknowledge these actions of our Christian ancestors in faith and to take steps towards healing some of these centuries’ old wounds of which many of our current church members, congregations, clergy, and even denominations may be unaware.

“In August 1619, just twelve years after the English settled Jamestown, Virginia, one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth, and some 157 years before English colonists here decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought twenty to thirty enslaved Africans from English pirates. They had been kidnapped from what is now Angola. This marked the beginning of the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War. More than 12.5 million Africans would be taken from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic. Almost two million perished along the way.”<sup>6</sup> Enslaved Black Africans forcibly brought to America, separated from their families, and stripped of their humanity, were enslaved upon arrival--if they survived the arduous journey--forced to adapt

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<sup>5</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah-Jones, *1619*, 9-10.

immediately to a new culture, a new climate, a new language. They were punished if they tried to maintain their language, their culture, their faith, their identity. They were forced to work under duress, in extreme conditions, receiving in return only basic food and shelter. Abuse, rape, and murder were commonplace. All of this happened under the banner of what was being created and promoted to the world as a land of freedom of expression, freedom to start over, freedom to worship as one chooses--all of which and more were denied both Africans and indigenous peoples alike.

“Enslaved peoples transformed the North American colonies into some of the most successful and profitable areas in the British Empire. Through backbreaking labor, they cleared territory, grew and harvested cotton which became the nation’s most valuable export accounting for half of American goods sold abroad and more than two-thirds of the world’s supply. They worked the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. They laid the foundations for the White House and the U.S. Capitol. They built the railroad fueling the Industrial Revolution. And they built the vast fortunes for white people in the North and in the South,” without benefitting in any way themselves.<sup>7</sup> How is it that these truths which are self-evident are not taught in schools? These stories should be told and retold at least every 4<sup>th</sup> of July as part of the success of America, just as Juneteenth should be celebrated and taught in schools to recognize the end of this American tragedy. But Juneteenth only marked the end of slavery, not of course the end of other American tragedies of perpetuating racial injustice from the 1860s forward.

Certainly, the Church is not the only group to blame for these actions. The early government endorsed, promoted, and benefitted from taking land and enslaving Africans. It

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah-Jones, *1619*, 10.

then took actions to continue white supremacy. “To reinforce national commitment to a white citizenry, the first naturalization law passed in the United States of March 26, 1790, limited citizenship to ‘free white persons’ and excluded indentured servants, slaves, and freed slaves.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the Constitution even framed this position in Article One, Section Two, stating that any person who was not free would be counted as three-fifths of a free individual for the purposes of determining congressional representation; and indigenous peoples were excluded completely, not to be recognized as a citizen at all. This was law until the article was repealed in 1868 with the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>9</sup> It was nearly 100 years before trafficked Africans were seen as whole persons let alone not property. The Church participated in this framework of the founding of the United States. It has not always admitted or even known about its complicity. Many claim with pride that America has always been all about freedom, with liberty and justice for all, but looking back into our history, this is simply not the case. Thomas Jefferson wrote that all men were created equal, “yet when he wrote those powerful words, he owned 130 enslaved human beings. He knew those words did not apply to one-fifth of the population.”<sup>10</sup>

I travelled to Monticello, Virginia in July 2022 as part of my ministerial sabbatical. One does not need to walk a great distance to see the presence of slavery on the grounds of the former President. Inside the mansion is a fireplace with a secret cabinet door that opens to reveal a dumbwaiter system where bottles of cider, beer, or wine could be sent up from the cellar. Going down to the cellar, the temperature was cooler even on a warm summer day, as it was designed for the preservation of alcoholic beverages. However, there also was a chill in the air knowing that this was where the enslaved peoples worked for a man who most white Americans look to

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<sup>8</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Paula S. Rothenberg, *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2016), 487.

<sup>10</sup> DiAngelo, *Nice Racism*, 29.

when they proclaim their own freedom. Just outside the cellar, the museum tells the story of Thomas Jefferson's concubine, Sally Hemings. Born into slavery in 1775, Hemings was sent to France, where she was set free. At age 16, she met Jefferson in Paris and negotiated a treaty where she would work inside the mansion and bear him children, but she would not work in the fields of his vast property. Part of the negotiated treaty was that whatever number of children they had together, the children would be enslaved to work at Monticello until they turned age 21. She gave birth to six children, two of whom died in infancy. A slide show on the property stopped on this sobering fact: Jefferson owned 607 people over the course of his lifetime. He freed only seven, all of whom were members of the extended Hemings family, and four of whom were his own children. Even after Jefferson's death, Sally was never freed. After Jefferson's death, 130 enslaved people were sold to settle his debts to the tune of \$107,000 (several million dollars today). They were sold to local merchants, professors at the University of Virginia, and Jefferson's relatives. Homes where enslaved people lived can be toured today just behind the mansion at Monticello. That the former President benefitted financially from the work of hundreds of enslaved people was undeniable.

Though politicians as recently as 2023 struggled to say that slavery was the cause of the Civil War, our nation ground to a halt in the debate that turned into warfare over whether life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness applied to all Americans, or whether the wealth generated from the debasement of trafficked enslaved peoples and their descendants was too important to set them free. Yet even after the north defeated the south and the emancipation proclamation was signed, "a new form of enslavement of African Americans began with incredible violence and hostility. Jim Crow laws were formalized on state and national levels... creating apartheid segregation. They lived in terror as they faced oppression by the Ku Klux Klan and White

Citizen Councils enforced by local police departments” of whom many were often members of Christian churches.<sup>11</sup> From the 1800s to the 1900s, Jim Crow became woven into the fabric of American society. The name “Jim Crow” comes from a minstrel singer played in the 1830s and 1840s by a white person in blackface. Exaggerated stereotypes of behavior included diminished intelligence, use of incorrect grammar, and a blissful contentment with slavery. Later, white communities that began enacting Jim Crow laws supporting segregation became known as sundown towns where blacks were not allowed to live, effectively segregating whites from blacks from cemeteries, to schools, to drinking fountains, and places to sit in restaurants or buses.<sup>12</sup>

After the Civil War and Reconstruction, amendments to the Constitution attempted to solidify freedoms for people of color. But they were not always complete, and some loopholes allowed for freedoms to be restricted over time. “The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment gave all black people in America their full freedom, decisively freeing all slaves.... The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States. This did not apply to Native Americans who were classified as dependent nations within a nation. ... The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment granted black men the right to vote. This did not apply to women. And black men attempting to vote, especially in the South, were often suppressed until the Civil Rights Act of 1965.<sup>13</sup> One loophole in the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment “abolished slavery, but included a phrase that said, ‘those duly convicted of a crime could be forced to labor as part of their punishment.’ This proved a way for blacks to be incarcerated for frivolous charges to maintain slavery.” Their forced labor for no pay on behalf of the State kept slavery alive.<sup>14</sup> On my ministerial sabbatical, I travelled to

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<sup>11</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Tisby, *Compromise*, 103-104.

<sup>13</sup> Tisby, *Compromise*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Tisby, *Compromise*, 105.

Montgomery, Alabama and visited The Legacy Museum. Housed in a building that was formerly used to sell enslaved Africans, this warehouse had been repurposed to inform all visitors about the enslaved people who built Montgomery, amassing wealth for the white landowners, and about the pain, suffering, and enduring trauma that has impacted later generations and become one of the results of slavery. The Legacy Museum shared personal stories of people who had passed through the building, and listed laws passed locally and federally to keep people of color suppressed. One display was a phone booth where the visitor could pick up a phone and listen to a former prisoner from Alabama tell their story. The one I listened to said that after he was convicted of the crime he committed, he was not sent to prison to sit in a cell; instead, he was sent to a cotton field where he was forced to pick cotton from morning to night, with minimal breaks, for no pay, no sick time off, and no days off. He testified through his phone call that slavery continues due to the loophole in the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment that allows those convicted of a crime to be forced to do labor. One of the most difficult displays to comprehend consisted of tall glass jars 10 or so per shelf with five or so shelves per side in multiple stations, each jar containing dirt from the approximate location of a known lynching. The jars of dirt may include some DNA of each murdered person, which is the only trace left of the human whose life was extinguished violently, with no judge or jury, no Miranda rights, no right to a trial, no defense attorney, and no bodies left to be given a proper burial.

The Legacy Museum also includes an outdoor memorial to all those people who are known to have been lynched. This is an emotionally devastating yet peacefully quiet and sacred display on a hilltop in Montgomery. After you walk through a retelling of the history of enslavement, and painful images of people reaching for freedom cast into iron statues, you walk into the display among five-foot-tall iron markers spaced evenly apart. In the beginning, each

marker lists states where known lynchings happened, including Northern and Northwest states. As you continue to walk, the floor begins to slope downward, but the iron markers stay where they are, separating from the ground. Now you notice that each iron marker is just one Southern state and county with up to 20 names. As you turn a corner, and continue to walk down the gentle slope, the iron markers seem to rise above your head; as you walk beneath them, you can still read the names from each county listed in the particular Southern state of the marker. There are four sides to the walkway. The further down you walk, in addition to the markers above your head are signs on the wall explaining the frivolous reasons why certain young Black men or teenagers were lynched for suspected or falsified crimes. A beautiful wall with water streaming down provides some comfort to the visitor now overwhelmed by the display that seems never-ending. When you exit, you are a different person. You now have a better appreciation of the depths of depravity that our nation has committed to attempt to suppress, scare, terrorize, and keep down Black and Brown people in America, some by laws and some by murder. We must never forget.

Every denomination was complicit either in their actions or economic gains from the enslavement of Africans, some more than others. In the 1800s, white slaveowners approached the Baptist Church in the South to offer their vast resources to build up the church. But the leaders of the denomination rejected their offer based on their disapproval of slave ownership. This led the white slaveowners to create the Southern Baptist Convention, which not only supported slavery but later the Confederacy as well.<sup>15</sup> In 1963, the mayor of Jackson, Mississippi, and a prominent member of the local United Methodist Church, “led the City Council to pass an ordinance that made ‘disturbing divine worship’ punishable by a fine of up to

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<sup>15</sup> Jones, *White*, 1.

\$500 and up to six months in prison.”<sup>16</sup> Simply the act of a black person attempting to attend a worship service in a white church in Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1960’s became a crime. Segregation from schools to restaurants to churches created long-lasting societal tensions. The difference can still be seen playing out in today’s churches. Often, when a single black person walks into a white church, white ushers take notice and may even follow the person around. Generational mistrust and pain from racism has led to this type of concern rather than unconditional welcome.

Today, “whites grow up isolated from people of color. We are taught to see a distorted picture of people of color and how they live. We accept privileges without learning it is racism. We are taught that everyone is supposed to be equal even though we know we are not, and whites are comfortable knowing that. We become gatekeepers of protecting things the way they are.” The same is often found in churches. “We gather and are comfortable with a church family that is visibly white. We are taught that Jesus loves the little children of all colors, but we don’t practice that. We practice individual choice, repentance, and forgiveness rather than liberation of whole peoples.”<sup>17</sup> We see this in society when schools are required to no longer teach the painful history of systemic racism because it may be uncomfortable for white children. We see this in society when library books that celebrate black hero characters are removed or banned so as not to upset white children. This is part of the lasting trauma of systemic racism both from the past and continuing into the present. “The purpose of tracing Christian complicity with racism is not to show white believers how bad they are. It is simply a fact of American history that white leaders and laity made decisions to maintain the status quo.” We should be

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<sup>16</sup> Jones, *White*, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 112-113.

feeling grief. “Grief is a natural response to the suffering of others. It indicates empathy with the pain that racism has caused black people. The ability to weep with those who weep is necessary for true healing.”<sup>18</sup> To start the long road towards bridging the gap between races, we need to find empathy once again for each other. But we also need to acknowledge and own the truth of white complicity in creating and sustaining racism from the beginning and continuing into the present.

Even in my own denomination we have been complicit in perpetuating racial injustice. I have always been taught, from my days in seminary to history papers that I wrote about my denomination to my ordination paper that the United Church of Christ was founded by four streams of denominations: The Christians, the Congregationalists, the Evangelicals, and the German Reformed. I have booklets published about the history of the UCC that I have handed out to new member classes for 20 years that teach about the four streams that merged in 1957 to form the United Church of Christ. And then, in 2023 at General Synod, the national gathering of our denomination, (held that year in Indianapolis), a dark secret was revealed to the majority of the white delegates, clergy, and visitors. There was and is a fifth stream that helped to found the United Church of Christ: The Afro-Christian Convention. “From 1892 to the 1960’s, the Afro-Christian Convention was composed of 150 churches, 25,000 members, 185 ordained ministers, and 150 Sunday schools located primarily in North Carolina and Virginia.”<sup>19</sup> In 1957, when the streams merged together to form the new denomination, the Afro-Christian was present and participated. Black UCC churches have been part of the UCC from 1957 to present day, yet the Afro-Christian Convention was never taught in required polity classes, included in UCC

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<sup>18</sup> Tisby, *Compromise*, 22-23.

<sup>19</sup> Yvonne V. Delk, *Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2023), 4.

publications, nor celebrated as one of the founding streams of our denomination. This was a complete shock to me when I heard it with my own ears at General Synod. The former President and General Minister, the Rev. John Dorhauer stood at the front and apologized. This was followed by the revelation of the publication of Yvonne Delk's book, Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ, which immediately sold out from the UCC marketplace on site in the convention hall. This sin of my denomination is finally being acknowledged and taught to current churches, seminarians, clergy, and to newcomers. The pain will continue for some time, but the acknowledgment has been made and we can now begin to shift from shunning to the celebration of our diverse history and current constituency.

Another aspect of complicity in the early Christian church is church land acquisition without acknowledgment or payment to local indigenous peoples. For any church that celebrates their history that dates to the founding of their local state, the founders of their congregation must have had contact with the local indigenous peoples who owned the land before their white counterparts arrived. Whether that contact was peaceful and included trade of goods or was wrought with conflict and violence, the acquisition of land for the church most likely did not include a fair payment to the indigenous peoples who lived there first. "There was little doubt among national or church leaders about the will of God in the continued taking of land from indigenous nations and placing the peoples on reservations."<sup>20</sup> The forced relocation of tens of thousands of indigenous Americans from their homelands across the multiple Trails of Tears was mostly completed before the Civil War. National policies were created for the purpose of erasing indigenous language, culture, and almost the complete existence of all indigenous peoples, the first Americans. A sinister way to circumvent payment for land was to take the land

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<sup>20</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 47.

by force, relocate the peoples to a remote location, and then attempt to erase the history and culture of the first peoples. One attempted method for this system was the Indian boarding school. Christian churches created and profited from boarding schools where untold numbers of indigenous children and youth having been kidnapped from their homes, suffered the indignity of having their hair cut, their clothing removed and replaced by uniforms, their language banned, and Christianity forced upon them. Thousands of children and youth were killed or died of neglect across the nation and were never returned to their homes, instead being buried on the school property, often in unmarked graves. Schools should never have cemeteries. Churches that supported Indian boarding schools were complicit in perpetuating racial injustice. Churches that took land or were gifted land grants from city, state, or national government from stolen indigenous land did not pay for the land and benefitted from ill-gotten gains.

Free or stolen land is not the only way white Christian churches benefitted from racial injustice. They also benefited because white church members advanced while their neighbors of color were not afforded the same opportunities. In the 1940s and 1950s, “returning veterans could use GI funds to attend college for free and their families could become homeowners thanks to loans insured by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). But even as black Americans paid into the system, they were unable to reap its benefits. On the federal level, the FHA engaged in redlining of neighborhoods where black Americans lived, rendering homes there ineligible for low-interest-rate thirty-year FHA-insured loans. Black veterans faced similar barriers at colleges and universities, few of which would enroll them. Black and white workers both paid the federal income taxes that generated revenue to finance these benefits, but black Americans were prevented from receiving them. They could only watch from the sidelines as their money helped fund the creation of a robust middle class, one that was almost exclusively

white. The Homestead Act of 1872 also made it possible to buy land cheaply, and it excluded black Americans.”<sup>21</sup> Tax policies along with home loan prevention ran parallel to black Americans also not having the same legal rights to live, work, marry, vote, or receive higher education like whites.<sup>22</sup> It would take 188 years from the founding of the United States until the 1964 Civil Rights Act made it illegal to discriminate against black Americans in schools and workplace. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act gave blacks the right to vote. In 1967, the Supreme Court case of *Loving v. Virginia* legalized racial and interracial marriage equality. In 1968, it became illegal to discriminate against black Americans for housing opportunities. This shows how Black Americans have had only about 60 years to amass personal wealth as compared to 200 years for white Americans.<sup>23</sup> And these opportunities were limited again when the Supreme Court gutted the Civil Rights Act in 2013, ushering in a new onslaught of voter suppression laws across the South, that were directed especially at restricting people of color all over again. Before slavery was abolished, white-owned companies accumulated wealth through insurance policies written on enslaved blacks. Banks used enslaved blacks as collateral for white loans.<sup>24</sup> All of these factors contributed to the advancement of white people and the restriction for advancement of people of color: the GI bill, FHA housing loans, tax policies, redlining black Americans into poorer sections of cities, restricting people of color from voting, marrying, working for equal pay, getting higher education, and only having equal access to civil rights for the past 60 years as opposed to 200 official years--not including the additional 150 years before 1776 when white Europeans first arrived. Over the generations, these factors among others

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<sup>21</sup> Dorothy B. Brown, *The Whiteness of Wealth: How the Tax System Impoverishes Black Americans – And How We Can Fix It* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2021), 15-16.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *Whiteness*, 16-17.

<sup>23</sup> Brown, *Whiteness*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, *Whiteness*, 17.

contributed to white wealth over other races in America. A 2016 Pew Research poll found that median wealth for white American households was \$171,000 as compared with \$17,100 for black households.<sup>25</sup> And four years after college graduation, Black Americans on average owe \$52,726 in student debt as compared with \$28,006 on average for white college graduates.<sup>26</sup> All of these advancements for white people afforded white Christians the ability to donate from their wealth to white churches more than people of other races could do for their own congregations.

An example of how these factors contribute to white Christian churches comes from Robert Jones who tells an amazing story about a white church in Macon, Georgia, that makes an uncomfortable discovery about its own past complicit racist actions that resulted in their benefit as a church. In the 1800s, the Baptist denomination was beginning to split over slavery. Soon after, Baptist churches became segregated. In Macon, Georgia, First Baptist church split, but ended up, after trial and error, building two church buildings right next to each other; the whites went to one building and the blacks went to the other--for 128 years!<sup>27</sup> In 2014, the white and black neighbor pastors began to talk with each other. They started very slowly creating opportunities to share fellowship together. Then one day, a white church member started doing some research and made a major, albeit painful, discovery. "In a single week in 1855, the church accounts-receivable ledger detailed income from the sale of two teenage boy slaves for \$950 each, equivalent to about \$56,000 today. That same week, the accounts-payable ledger reflected a payment towards the pastor's salary and the church building fund."<sup>28</sup> Reality hit the white church leaders hard. Their former pastor and current church benefitted financially from the sale of enslaved people. The current pastor decided to go to the church with this news in the

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<sup>25</sup> Brown, *Whiteness*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *Whiteness*, 97.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, *White*, 201.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, *White*, 205.

following Sunday's sermon. When he shared the news, there was an audible gasp in the sanctuary. Instantly, the church learned it had been complicit in racial injustice in its past. In its next integrated gathering, white church members shared their grief and shock with their black church members next door. This action gave the congregants an opportunity to mourn together, for the first time in over a century.

How many other white churches benefitted from the sale of enslaved and trafficked peoples? How many white churches benefitted from not paying for the land on which their churches stand? How many white churches benefitted from advancements afforded them but not to their sibling neighbors of color in their communities? The manual in this major project will help white churches begin to tackle these and other important questions.

## Chapter 6: White Churches Perpetuate Racial Injustice

The difference between acknowledging complicity and perpetuating racial injustice is what we do with knowing the difference. If white Christians knowingly are complicit in racism and do nothing to change that, then they perpetuate racial injustice. “Individual sin is a thought, feeling, or action by a single human being motivated by selfishness, greed, or in this case advancement over another person. Collective sins are actions by multiple people acting collectively to hurt or oppress other groups of people for their own benefit or advancement. In the US, individualism is a value and likewise sin is most often seen or perceived to be an individual incrimination. Collective sin is a foreign concept for many white Americans. When an individual sins in the form of bigotry, hatred, or racist remarks or actions, the responsible individual needs to repent and make personal amends. But when collective sin such as institutional racism occurs, the entire group needs to repent and make amends. Many people find it difficult to see their complicity and will say comments like: ‘I’ve never owned slaves or I’m not responsible for someone else’s racist behavior.’ The thinking is that they are not responsible for the sins of the whole in so doing it removes the individual from the systemic racism. But as long as one race continues to advance above others, systemic racism continues with countless numbers of participants whether knowingly or unknowingly participating.”<sup>1</sup> Individuals may or may not be aware of how their words and actions may be racist. There are plenty of books and life lessons taught about how individuals can look at their lives and make improvements to change their ways. There are not as many books or concepts about churches and denominations taking a closer look at their histories, their words, their actions, or their inactions that are racist or promote racial injustice. Churches that do not look within fall prey to continuing the sin of

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<sup>1</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 88-89.

perpetuating racial injustice. It is one thing to look back at our collective American history and acknowledge, regret, or ignore the historical facts of how we got to now. I assert in this Major Project that white Christians can no longer ignore the historical facts, and even more so, we need to acknowledge the egregious actions of our ancestors in faith, we need to feel some regret for these actions, we may need to make confessions of these past sins even though we ourselves did not commit them--at least as a starting point and in acknowledgment of the fact that many if not most of our ancestors in faith would not or did not acknowledge their actions as not only not-Christian but abhorrent. It is another thing for white Christians to not acknowledge, regret, or ignore continuing these practices today. Continuing to perpetuate racial injustice in small or large ways is painful to people of color, and continues systemic racism, as well as generational trauma.

White church members need to be aware of micro-aggressions. These are racist words or actions exhibited knowingly or unknowingly by whites against people of color, such as when a white person “locks their door when a black person walks by, when a white person calls the police because she sees a black person walking in the same park, when black children are harassed for playing the same way white children play, and for assuming that black people are the help.” Society has started to look at micro-aggressions, but a deeper look would reveal that no matter the scale, each of these actions are a form of racism and abuse. Author Ibram X. Kendi says, “I detest the post-racial platform that supports its sudden popularity. A persistent daily low hum of racist abuse is not minor or micro. The word abuse more accurately describes the action and its effects on people: distress, anger, worry, depression, anxiety, pain, fatigue, and suicide.”<sup>2</sup> Abuse is abuse, whether it is intentional or not, whether it comes from lack of awareness or not.

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<sup>2</sup> Kendi, *Antiracist*, 46.

Cultural appropriations fall into this category as well. Before I married into an indigenous American family, I was unaware of how some of the language I used was not only a cultural appropriation but how harmful and painful my words were to my family. I now take the opportunity to correct white people when I hear them saying any of the following phrases.

“Let’s have a powwow over here to talk about some things.” Just because it is a fun rhyming word for white people to say, has nothing to do with what a powwow really is. A powwow for indigenous people is not simply a business meeting to go over a few items on an agenda. A powwow is a celebration, a large gathering of family, friends, and newcomers. Powwows have wonderful foods, ceremonial dancing, prayers, and acknowledgments of veterans, ancestors, and elders. There are specific dances for specific regions on Turtle Island. There are opportunities to purchase hand-crafted goods. Whenever a white person says, “let’s have a powwow,” it takes away from the beautiful celebrations of our indigenous neighbors.

“He doesn’t know much, he’s new, and he doesn’t have much say or power in the organization because he is the low man on the totem pole.” Totem poles have nothing to do with corporate ladders. Totem poles are sacred depictions for each community in which they reside. Each totem depicted has a purpose. Often, there is a bird on top, such as an eagle, or a thunderbird. The purpose of the bird is to carry the messages of the peoples to the Creator. And the totem on the bottom is the protector of the people and is quite important. So when white people equate the low man on the totem pole with someone who is not important and doesn’t know much, it is disrespectful abuse to indigenous identity and beliefs.

“That person is crazy; they are going off the reservation.” When white Americans forced indigenous Americans to live on reservations, if an indigenous person tried to escape, they would be killed by white enforcers. Thus, one would be crazy to try to leave for fear of being killed.

When used by white Americans, this phrase is painful and brings up generational trauma for many indigenous peoples. It has become meaningless for white Americans who have--and have always had--the freedom to come and go as they please. For indigenous Americans, the phrase is a painful reminder of forced incarceration.

“Well, let’s all get together and sing Kumbaya with our drums.” Kumbaya was an African song and was brought to America with enslaved Africans. For them, it was a song of unity in the face of despair and a longing for their homeland. It became appropriated into campfire songs for white Americans, and more recently, has become a sarcastic punching bag for any gathering of people who are depicted as not accomplishing anything worthwhile. Again, for white Americans, Kumbaya has lost its initial meaning. For Black Americans, it is a painful reminder of the generational trauma of their ancestors being trafficked, and enslaved, and their culture not only suppressed but turned into a joke.

“Stay away from so and so, they are really on the warpath.” “Hold down the fort while we are away.” “We may need to circle the wagons for this project.” These sayings reinforce a stereotype that indigenous Americans are violent warriors, wear warpaint, are animals, and are wild. The historical meanings of the phrases are lost on white Americans. Even if they are not using these phrases against indigenous Americans intentionally, their use brings up generational trauma for indigenous Americans who are a peaceful people trying to live their lives like any other citizen.

Indigenous mascots for sporting events are often caricatures or stereotypes of indigenous Americans of the past, often portrayed wearing war paint and headdresses with feathers, and with red skin. Some sports teams have moved away from these caricatures, but others continue to use them, chant in unison in a mocking manner led by the stadium endorsed sound effects, beat on

large drums, and encourage the fans to raise and lower their arms in unison resembling a mock tomahawk chop which also continues the stereotype.

The difference between acknowledging complicity and perpetuating racial injustice is what we do with knowing the difference. It is time to stop using these phrases, to acknowledge the racism in them as well as in the caricatures from professional to school sports teams to Halloween costumes, in order to stop perpetuating racial injustice from a micro to a macro level of abuse. So how do we do that?

The main answer to this question will be addressed in the manual, yet I will list some starting points here. One suggestion is to invite white churches to “move away from charity and move toward social change. Is giving out food helpful as compared to providing job fairs, GED classes, affordable housing, help with bank loans, etc.”<sup>3</sup> Churches like to be charitable. Part of our identity, one of our guiding principles in following Christ, is to help and love our neighbor. We watch Jesus heal people and we create hospitals. We watch Jesus feed the 5,000 and we open food pantries. But the question becomes, are food pantries enough, when we do not address the systems in place that keep people hungry, homeless, and without healthcare? Moving away from easy gifts and toward social change is one way to help all members of society rise above the poverty line especially people of color who have not had the same opportunities as whites.

Another opportunity is for white churches to work through the questions that Robin DiAngelo offers for small group discussion in her book, *Nice Racism*. “Did you grow up in an integrated neighborhood? Was it due to gentrification? If you did not grow up in an integrated neighborhood, why? Did you know where Black people lived in your area? Did your parents

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<sup>3</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 98.

encourage you to make friends with Black children? Did your parents have a significant number of Black friends? Was your school integrated? What was the ratio: white to black? Did you study systemic racism in your K-12 education? College? How many of your teachers / professors were white? Black? Do you work in an organization in which Black people are represented at all levels? Does your workplace profess to value diversity in marketing and vision statements? If so, what percentage of your workplace leadership are people of color? If you are married and you showed me your wedding album, how integrated would your friendship circle be?”<sup>4</sup> These are good starting questions for white church members to consider, how diverse was their upbringing. These life lessons are brought into the life of the church and play out in intentional and sometimes unintentional ways.

Jemar Tisby also gives us some action steps from his book, *The Color of Compromise*. He says, “there is a difference between complicit and courageous Christianity. Complicit Christianity devalues the image of God in people of color. Courageous Christianity embraces racial and ethnic diversity. It stands against any person, policy, or practice that would dim the glory of God.”<sup>5</sup> This gives us a new avenue moving forward. Acknowledge complicity but then be courageous about working for social justice and change. He suggests churches work towards awareness, relationships, and commitment. Here are some ways he suggests to do that: “Watch documentaries about the racial history of the United States. Diversify your social media with different racial outlooks than yours. Talk with someone of another race about their experience and perspective. Join a club or go to a diverse location and get involved. Join an organization that advocates for racial and social justice.”<sup>6</sup> “Think about reparations. Not just once but have

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<sup>4</sup> DiAngelo, *Nice Racism*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Tisby, *Compromise*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Tisby, *Compromise*, 195.

study groups. Discuss how Black people worked for centuries for no pay. Discuss the impact of Jim Crow laws that continued well into the 1960s. Talk about how redlining prevents homeownership that disallows Blacks from producing wealth. Churches could work together to create a Jubilee to collect monies to forgive Black debt, or create trust funds for Black youth, or to put down payments on homes for Black families, or to create educational funds.”<sup>7</sup> Two other suggestions also look outside the walls of the Christian church and invite a wider conversation with the community. The importance of these suggestions is that they give voice to the Church once again into the heartbeat of the neighborhoods. These last suggestions are to work towards the removal of Confederate monuments and flags in your neighborhood or surrounding area. Most towns have a veteran’s park or statues in the center of town or in cemeteries. Does your town have statues of Confederate soldiers or Confederate flags? How do these images affect your neighbors of color? Why are there the Confederate images in your town? When were they placed there? What benefit does commemorating the Confederacy have as opposed to celebrating the union of our nation and the abolishing of slavery? Finding ways to celebrate Juneteenth in the community would also be a step forward. The first step for the church would be to learn how many people in your congregation know what Juneteenth is. If less than the majority, spend time informing the congregation on the importance of the national holiday. Have speakers come in to discuss its importance. Teach about the celebration of freedom for every American. Ask the congregation if everyone in your town feels free and has access to the same benefits of citizenship. Each of these suggested steps will need education and enthusiasm from the church to work towards these goals.

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<sup>7</sup> Tisby, *Compromise*, 197-200.

In another book, *How to Fight Racism*, Tisby says, “To the trepidatious, those who worry about what taking bolder steps down this journey of racial justice might cost them, know this: the only way to grow is to go. The only way to increase your courage, perseverance, and skill is to get started. The steps do not have to be large, but if you keep going, baby steps turn into long strides towards freedom.”<sup>8</sup> If our nation is ever going to move forward, if white churches are ever truly going to be welcoming and affirming of all races, then we need to face our past, learn from the sins of edited Bibles to segregated sanctuaries, ask ourselves why white churches have fared so well with stolen land and perhaps shady funds and investments that grow into cathedrals with million-dollar endowments. We need to take a closer look at ourselves in the mirror, and in our closets and ledgers, to begin to understand why we continue to be mainly white churches and how we can begin to think about justice work, to move from being complicit Christians to being courageous Christians.<sup>9</sup> The difference between acknowledging complicity and perpetuating racial injustice is what we do with knowing the difference. If we do nothing, nothing will change. If we investigate our histories, acknowledge the complicity of our ancestors in faith, see how white churches have profited, and then pivot to creating community connections with our neighbors of color, we can work towards the first steps of equality.

In 2015, the United States Supreme Court approved equal marriage rights for same-gender couples. The week after that ruling, my congregation began to ask me what that meant for our church, to which I responded that I would officiate any wedding between two consenting adults regardless of orientation. The congregation then asked what more we could do to be affirming of the LGBTQ+ communities. So, we embarked on a journey of what it would mean for us to become an Open and Affirming congregation. We held several church-wide Bible

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<sup>8</sup> Tisby, *Fight Racism*, 205.

<sup>9</sup> Barndt, *Anti-Racist Church*, 95.

studies discussing Biblical texts in historical, cultural, and systemic context. We prayed. We talked. We listened. We brought in guest speakers. We did not rush. And after a year and a half, we voted 85% in favor of becoming an Open and Affirming church, not only welcoming but affirming all people into the life of our church as members, leaders, and even pastors in celebration of their race, gender, orientation, marital status, economic status, or ability. Most churches in our area say they are welcoming but are not affirming of everyone. Our church has been enjoying new growth since becoming Open and Affirming, growing younger and becoming more active in our community, working for justice and inclusion, especially in public schools.

Soon we will begin using the manual in this Major Project to take a closer look at our complicity, both historic and current, regarding race as a component of our Open and Affirming congregational identity. We will research our history to determine if our congregation, which was the first church to be founded in our town, compensated the indigenous peoples of our area. We will reach out to the current administration of tribal leaders in our area as we work to acknowledge our past lack of relationship and hope for strengthening of our relationship now. We will look into our past responses to historic local events where race was a factor, such as what if any was our church's response to local Indian boarding schools, slavery, the Confederacy, the Civil War, Juneteenth. We will ask ourselves through research if we benefitted from slavery, redlining, segregation, white flight, and amassing wealth from these systemic racist policies. We will look into our reactions, if any, to Jim Crow laws, the civil rights movements, Dr. King's life and assassination, race riots, voting rights and accessibility, and up to current community discussions about race, equity, equality, and how we responded to the murder of George Floyd and others. We will take time to look at our language, asking if we find ourselves saying phrases that are racist in nature and trying to change our language to be more respectful.

We will ask ourselves if we have the courage to call out others, from our friends and family to strangers, when we hear racist comments or phrases. We will ask ourselves how we will respond individually and as a church to future displays or events of racial injustice.

We will invite our sibling churches in our denomination to take on this challenge of looking at the manual and creating church-wide discussions to learn about their own complicity in perpetuating racial injustice. We will start by offering the manual and Major Project to churches in our Association (regional grouping of churches), and then share it with our conference minister for their input on whether to share it with other churches throughout our state grouping of UCC churches. If we are emboldened and have support from our regional leaders, we may offer this Major Project and manual up as a Resolution in our Conference and possibly national Synod, as well challenge our white congregations to look within their histories to discover their complicity in perpetuating racial injustice and invite them to share the resource with other white congregations in their communities in the hopes that by acknowledging our complicity, we can indeed take the first step towards working to end racism and systemic racist policies in our communities, states, and nation.

## Chapter 7: Historiographical Studies

Historiography is the history of history. To learn from our history, we need to study our history. There are methods to do that. This chapter will explore American institutions that achieved this goal and what they did with their discoveries.

Brown University was the first Ivy League school to acknowledge formally its ties to slavery. Upon this realization and after discussion about how to respond, the university created a \$10 million endowment to promote academic excellence in K-12 students in Providence as well as loan forgiveness for graduate students who serve urban schools and students locally.<sup>1</sup> Also after looking into its own history, and discovering their complicity in perpetuating racial injustice, Princeton Theological Seminary created a \$27.6 million reparative endowment, established scholarship funds, and hired new staff.<sup>2</sup> And again, after completing its own historiography, “the University of Virginia responded by erecting a \$7 million memorial, built a dormitory named for enslaved people on campus, and established scholarships for descendants of slavery. In 2019, Georgetown University announced a fund to raise \$400,000 annually to benefit the descendants of enslaved people that the college sold in 1838.”<sup>3</sup>

In 2016, Drew Gilpin Faust, Harvard University’s 28<sup>th</sup> president, publicly acknowledged that Harvard was directly complicit in America’s system of racial bondage.<sup>4</sup> The university commenced in-depth studies with professors and students from each branch of education at the school, looking through their own history for proof and examples of that complicity.<sup>5</sup> Their historiography documented “incontestable truths that during the seventeenth and eighteenth

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<sup>1</sup> *Harvard*, 118.

<sup>2</sup> *Harvard*, 118.

<sup>3</sup> *Harvard*, 119.

<sup>4</sup> *Harvard*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Harvard*, 140.

centuries, the sale and trafficking of African human beings in slavery and the industries rooted in the labor of enslaved women, men, and children comprised a vital part of the New England economy, and powerfully shaped Harvard University, leaders, faculty, and staff and that the school accrued wealth through the slave trade and labor.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to working with their students and faculties, Harvard also enlisted research help from their own archivists as well as local libraries to complete their work.

Among their discoveries was the realization that there were known names of unpaid enslaved laborers who worked in the home of two Harvard presidents.<sup>7</sup> The research showed that “slavery was integral at Harvard. Over nearly 150 years from the 1636 founding to 1783 Harvard presidents, faculty, and staff enslaved more than 70 individuals, who fed and cared for students. The University benefitted from extensive financial ties to slavery, accumulated wealth from slavery, which then allowed Harvard to hire faculty, support white students with scholarships, develop infrastructure, and helped it become a national institution.”<sup>8</sup> “The most well-known gift to Harvard by a donor involved in slavery is the bequest of Isaac Royall Jr. whose family’s sugar plantation on the Caribbean island of Antigua furnished the wealth that endowed the first professorship of law at Harvard.”<sup>9</sup> As a result of these discoveries, in 2017, Harvard Law School dedicated a memorial on the school’s campus to the enslaved people whose labor contributed to the school’s wealth and prominence.<sup>10</sup>

Each of these elite schools have looked within their histories and determined that they are complicit and have benefited from the enslavement of trafficked Africans, from the unpaid labor

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<sup>6</sup> *Harvard*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Harvard*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Harvard*, 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Harvard*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Harvard*, 140.

of enslaved peoples, and from the sale of enslaved peoples. These schools became successful in part by land that was stolen or granted to them from indigenous peoples who were never compensated for the land or the trauma instilled upon them for losing their homelands.

Likewise, the enslaved workers were never compensated nor were they treated humanely by these institutions of higher education, some who were affiliated with and/or received financial donations from Christian churches to instill an education based on Christ's love--yet being oblivious to the pain they were causing. The schools are now beginning to acknowledge their complicity and responding with initial financial reparations in the form of scholarships to descendants of enslaved peoples. These policies are in the beginning stages after centuries of generational trauma. It will take decades to see if these actions are meeting their intended goals. But they are good first steps of acknowledgment.

## Chapter 8: Resource Manual

Now is the time for your congregation to go through the process of looking at your own history, to discover your church's complicity.

- Did your church benefit by obtaining land from indigenous peoples who lived on the land where your church now exists, and, if so, was payment was ever made to those indigenous peoples?
- Did your church benefit from the sale or labor of enslaved and trafficked Africans?
- Did your church benefit from white generational wealth generated by the above-mentioned complicities, or generated from white neighborhoods that enjoyed higher property value from redlining and/or FHA loans or GI Bills not made available to peoples of color in the neighborhoods surrounding your church?
- Has your congregation responded or not responded to racial atrocities in or nearby your location from:
  - Indian boarding schools to
  - the Trails of Tears to
  - civil rights locations to
  - Jim Crow laws
  - to segregation in your schools, restaurants, or local public transportation
  - to racial unrest in your community.

If your church has a historian, or an archives or archivist, or has completed a history of your church for anniversaries or promotional celebrations, then you have a head start on your work. If your church is affiliated with a denomination, then you may be able to locate resources on how to put together your own church history if you have not taken this step. If your church is

unaffiliated with a denomination, you may still use denominational resources as a guide in addition to using this manual. Here are three denominational resources for your reference.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) suggests that you start with an outline which you may refine as you go along. The outline will serve as a guide for you from your starting date forward. They suggest recording your founding date and location, and making the following lists: all of your pastors by name and the number of years they served, each church building and stories about why and when they were built and where, interesting members or leaders or families, notable Sunday school teachers and/or the expansion of the Christian Education programs, major fights and reconciliations, ministries and missions within the congregation, obstacles faced and overcome, interaction with world and local events, and evidence of community impact. They continue by encouraging researchers to find and read all minutes of leadership meetings, secure correspondence, annual reports, church bulletins, newsletters, legal papers, and membership lists. If your church has a cemetery, make sure to preserve the names of members buried there. Find and read references to the congregation in local history sources such as newspapers or city and county histories. Interview older members or previous pastors of the congregation who may know or remember important stories in the life of the church.<sup>1</sup> This study of your church history will help you when you begin working through the manual, which you may do at the same time or as a separate project, but you will notice similarities in researching your church history for your own celebrations and/or to discover your congregation's complicity in perpetuating racial injustice.

Similarly, the United Methodist church also has suggestions about how to create your own church history. They suggest collecting lots of pictures and sorting them into an organized

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<sup>1</sup> "Writing Congregation Histories," Presbyterian Church (USA), accessed January 30, 2024, <https://www.history.pcusa.org/services/resources-opportunities/writing-congregation-histories>.

collection, chronologically or by subject. You might contact your congregation members to see if they have pictures they would like to contribute. Next, go through your church files and church library if you have one. They also suggest going to your local library or city archives to locate important articles and dates in the life of your church or area. You might also include a list of important weddings or funerals. They suggest using gloves when handling older documents and/or photographs.<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 2023, I attended General Synod, the national gathering of my denomination, the United Church of Christ, in Indianapolis, Indiana. I attended a workshop titled, “Managing your Church Archives” presented by the Congregational Library & Archives of the UCC. The leaders of the workshop said we should care about this work because your church can protect its past, preserve the present, and prepare for the future. They had a similar list of documents to locate, including leadership meeting minutes, annual reports, baptisms, weddings, funerals, pastoral documents such as call agreements, sermons, and letters, financial records such as ledgers and annual reports, construction reports, legal paperwork, photographs, member directories, anniversary programs or booklets, bulletins, and promotional materials. They suggest creating a team or committee including members, church staff, and clergy. For more information, go to: [www.congregationallibrary.org](http://www.congregationallibrary.org).

These denominational resources parallel the work of this manual. If your church has a written historical narrative, you have a head start. If not, you may use these or other resources to start that process as well. From this point forward, the direction of the manual will be more

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<sup>2</sup> “How to record the history of your church,” Resource United Methodist Church, accessed January 30, 2024, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/how-to-record-the-history-of-your-church>

concisely directed towards how your church knowingly or unknowingly is complicit in perpetuating racial injustice from your founding through the present day.

As you research, you may want to prepare yourself for what you may discover. You may want to begin with prayer over what you are to research, giving thanks for your ancestors in faith yet also, like the serenity prayer, recognizing what cannot be changed from the actions of the past, yet also seeking the courage to make changes for the future considering what you may discover. As I was delving into my resources, I made a discovery of my own that I both wasn't prepared for, nor have I yet discerned what my correct response should be. First, I need to acknowledge a possible connection that I have to the enslavement of African peoples.

When I was a teenager, one Christmas, my parents gave each of us: (Mom, Dad, my brother, and me) purple sweatshirts with the words "Furman University" emblazoned on the front. We all erupted in laughter, as we had never heard of such a place. Then, one Christmas, it even may have been that one, we all boarded a plane and flew from Michigan to North Carolina to visit family wintering there. We all wore our sweatshirts through the Charlotte airport, thinking we were so cute. Imagine our surprise when we were approached again and again by strangers asking with joy if we had all attended the school. Sheepishly, we admitted that no, we hadn't, it was just our surname and we thought it was funny.

Years later, I found myself in South Carolina and took a detour to swing by the university for a photo op. It was quite bizarre to walk through the beautiful campus with my name fashioned on buildings and signs. I especially lingered near the sign pointing to the Furman golf course.

And then, as I dove into my research, I discovered that in the 1860s, funds were sought for the first Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. "Nearly all of the initial South Carolina

funds were provided from the proceeds of slave labor... \$26,000 came from the prominent slaveholding Richard Furman family.”<sup>3</sup> A shock went through my body. To my knowledge, there is no direct relation from my immediate family, but the spelling of our last names is the same so it seems likely that there must be some distant connection that was never verbally passed to our side of the family.

In 2016, Furman University began to research its own historiography, looking into its past to learn about the school’s connections to the enslavement of African peoples and how the school benefitted. “Scrawled in wispy handwriting, [a] diary described its owner’s days while a student at the school – how much his uncle’s slave sold for, and how his professor, James C. Furman, let his class out early so they could witness a hanging.”<sup>4</sup> At least two Furman’s at the school, Richard and James, supported slavery and owned enslaved peoples themselves, James doing so while he was the first President of the University. The school created a task force to research their history, discover their complicity, make public their findings, and then offer recommendations to reflect and atone for the school’s injustices. “The task force came up with 19 recommendations such as creating a statue honoring the first black student, offering scholarships for minority students, implementing the report to be used in classrooms, and raising awareness in the community such as events promoting the erased history of the school’s former slaves.”<sup>5</sup>

What do you do when you see within the pages of history that your namesake benefitted from and promoted the enslavement of innocent peoples by the millions at the pain of so many for the enrichment of white peoples? Whether we who are white see ourselves in direct or

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<sup>3</sup> Jones, *White*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> “Unearthing the past: Furman reckons with its early leadership,” Greenville Journal, October 17, 2018, <https://greenvillejournal.com/news/unearthing-the-past-furman-reckons-with-its-early-leadership/>

<sup>5</sup> Greenville Journal, “Unearthing the past.”

indirect ways as complicit, white people have benefitted from the theft of indigenous land as well as by the enslavement of African peoples and many other intentional methods of keeping people of color oppressed, from Jim Crow laws to Indian boarding schools, to redlining, to segregation, to discrimination from the beginning of colonization until now. What do we do when we see ourselves as the ones who are perpetuating racial injustice? Kendi tells us to acknowledge our complicity. We do that through research and then by sharing what we find.

### **Indigenous Acknowledgments of the past and present**

The first step is land acknowledgment. Does your church know which indigenous nation(s) were present in your area before the founding of your church and are still present now? If not, you may go to: [www.native-land.ca](http://www.native-land.ca). Simply type in your church address, and the map will then zoom in to your location. Move your mouse to the center of the page and a box will appear telling you the tribal nations to acknowledge. What is important about this step is not to see this just as who was in your location first, but also to acknowledge that your indigenous neighbors are still in your neighborhoods. Do research to find out how your indigenous neighbors are doing. Connect with them. Create a relationship based on being neighborly and without the intent to evangelize.

- Was your church founded within 50 years of the founding of your state?
- Do you have records as to whom your church paid for the land on which your building(s) reside?
- Was any payment made to the indigenous nation(s) in your church area?

- If your property was gifted to you by a church member or in a land grant, research if either step originated from theft either by broken treaty or other means for the acquisition of land from local indigenous peoples.
- Did your church benefit financially by not paying local indigenous peoples for the land?

To acknowledge your land and your indigenous neighbors, add a sentence or two to your church website, your social media, and/or your bulletin stating that your church honors all the ancestral stewards of this land on which our church building(s) reside(s). For example, “We acknowledge the past, present, and future relationships with the (specified) (Nations, Bands, Tribes, or however your local indigenous entity identifies itself).” As mentioned previously in this major project, for generations, indigenous peoples have been forced off their homelands, often forced to abandon their language, clothing styles, or religion. Their culture has been mocked or ignored. Churches that reside on stolen land are complicit in this racial injustice. Acknowledgment of either the theft of or nonpayment for land is a start in recognition of the sins of the past.

Further research is to look up the closest Indian boarding school to your church.

- If it was within 100 miles of your congregation, was your church in existence while the boarding school was operating?
- Can you discern from your church records if your church supported, protested against, or was even aware of the atrocities carried out at Indian boarding schools?
- Contact your local indigenous nation and ask them if their ancestors were sent to any Indian boarding schools.

- If your church supported or did nothing about Indian boarding schools, consider either drafting an apology to your local indigenous nation or creating or contributing towards a scholarship fund for current and future indigenous youth in your area.

Further research is to determine the proximity of your church to the Trails of Tears.

- Does your church reside within 100 miles of any of the Trails of Tears?
- Did your church benefit from land acquired after local indigenous peoples were forcibly removed?
- If your church was in existence when the forced marches of the Trails of Tears happened, is there any record of how your church responded, either in favor or in protest? If yes, include this knowledge in your letter of apology and acknowledgment to the local indigenous nation. If no, consider taking an intergenerational church field trip to one or more of the Trails of Tears to learn more about this part of our American history. Specifically consider visiting the Cherokee National History Museum in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, or the Oconaluftee Indian Village in Cherokee, North Carolina, to learn more about the Trails of Tears.

How often do you, your church members, your church leaders, your Sunday School teachers, your elders, and/or your clergy use racial micro-aggression phrases like: “There was nothing here before our church was founded,” “Let’s have a powwow meeting,” “That person is the low man on the totem pole,” “That person is really off the reservation,” “That person is on the warpath,” “It’s time to circle the wagons,” “You are going to need to hold down the fort,” etc.

- First, research the origin of these phrases. What does it mean when a white person uses them? How do the phrases affect indigenous peoples?
- Second, think of how these phrases perpetuate white superiority over your indigenous neighbors.
- Third, recognize that these phrases hurt our neighbors rather than following Christ's teachings to love our neighbors.
- Fourth, actively speak up when you hear someone use these phrases and invite them to stop using them lest they be seen as a white supremacist.

Begin attending local powwows. Watch documentaries about indigenous life in America. Watch indigenous tv shows like Reservation Dogs or movies like Killers of the Flower Moon and discuss them as a church. Take field trips with youth and/or any age group to local indigenous museums and/or research local Indian boarding schools. Create a positive relationship with your local indigenous nation. For the initial land acknowledgment, have your pastor create a worship service that includes a time of confession for generational trauma caused by white ancestors over our indigenous neighbors; invite local indigenous peoples to participate by spoken words, prayers, and/or an honor song with a drum; invite local indigenous peoples to smudge away negative energies from historic or current tensions. Consider a one-time or continual financial contribution(s) to the local indigenous nation, either towards payment for the land on which the church resides and/or in recognition of past systemic pains suffered which can be put towards scholarships or needs of the local nation as a step towards either acknowledgment or healing.

### **Acknowledgments of enslaved and trafficked Africans and their descendants**

- In looking at your church history, did your church benefit financially from the purchase or sale of enslaved peoples?
- Did enslaved peoples participate in the construction of church property or other structures in the neighborhood of your church?
- If your church existed during times of enslavement in US history, did your church speak out in favor or against slavery, or was it silent?
- Did your church speak in favor or against Jim Crow laws or was it silent?
- Did your church's hometown observe segregation in schools, restaurants, or on public transportation?
- Was your church ever segregated (for example, with white congregants in front or on a main floor level and Black congregants in back or in a balcony)?
- Did your church speak in favor or against the actions for civil rights in our nation, or was it silent?
- How many of your current or past clergy, leaders, teachers, or members are people of color?
- How often do you, your church members, your church leaders, your Sunday School teachers, your elders, and/or your clergy use racial micro-aggression phrases like: "Let's have a kumbaya moment," "That person of color is really articulate," "Don't blame me, I never owned slaves," "White privilege doesn't exist," "All lives matter," "I don't see color." Research each of these phrases to learn why they are traumatic and abusive to people of color and be prepared to speak out against them when you hear others, especially if church members, use them.

- Did your church or parsonage benefit from being built during the process of redlining whereby people of color could not purchase land or homes within a 10-mile radius of your church?
- Did your church benefit financially by white members who benefitted by owning homes in more profitable areas where people of color could not purchase homes, historically or currently?
- Does your church observe / celebrate Juneteenth? If so, how? If not, why not? Is Juneteenth taught to all age groups in the church?
- How does your church celebrate people of color in your congregation and in your community?
- Did your church acknowledge the death of George Floyd? Martin Luther King Jr.? If so, how, if not, why not?
- How did your church observe, live through, or react during the Black Lives Matter national protests?
- Does your church react to racial injustices today? In what way? Are your church reactions just internal or do you share your reactions in your community?
- How or when did your denomination, if your church is affiliated with one, arrive in America? In what ways did your denomination participate in the history of racism and help to give birth to the racial problems of today? How did your denomination deal with those who attempted to resist racism?
- Do you affirm diversity in your church? If so, how? How visible is your cause to the congregation? To your community? What percentage of your congregation is on board

with affirming diversity? If your church affirms diversity, has the membership of people of color in your church or denomination increased?

- How many people of color serve in leadership positions from lay to clergy in your church?
- How many people of color are pastors in your regional denominational area? How many people of color are leaders in your denomination?

Look at a large map of the neighborhoods around your church. Mark with either highlighters or pins of a variety of colors by decade where your church members live. Can you discern a pattern of who moved in where, when, and possibly why? Where do people of color live in the neighborhoods surrounding your church? Can you discern a pattern of who moved in where, when, and possibly why? Do the neighborhoods around your church represent white flight from urban to suburban housing, segregation, and/or property inequity?

If your church benefitted from the enslavement of trafficked Africans and their descendants, segregation, Jim Crow laws, redlining, etc., consider creating an acknowledgment on your website, social media, and bulletins, stating your church's complicity in perpetuating racial injustice, listing them from historic to current. Invite the pastor to create a worship service that includes a time of confession for the sins of generational trauma. Consider inviting local leaders of the NAACP and/or local leaders of color to attend the worship service and to speak or offer prayers. Consider creating scholarships for local students of color; working to end redlining, and to ensure affordable housing; taking stands against racism; taking youth and/or congregation members of all ages to civil rights museums, specifically The Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, and the Lorraine Hotel and Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee; and creating positive relationships with people of color. Choosing any/or all of these

actions will start a process of acknowledgment of the sins of our ancestors in faith and will start a process of learning for the church in the hopes that one day, we will move from complicity to community.

## Chapter 9: Topics for Future Exploration

The first topic I would like to explore further is reparations. This Major Project intentionally leaves the door to reparations open-ended for each congregation to discern and decide what if any reparations are due to indigenous peoples for uncompensated land, mission projects, scholarship development, relationship building, as well as for any reparations due to Black and Brown African American descendants of slavery for unpaid labor for work done on church buildings or from any financial gain from the sale of enslaved persons or from the financial gains of the system of slavery that financially benefitted the whole nation, as well as financial gains for white congregation members and clergy from segregation, Jim Crow laws, redlining, white flight into suburbs, etc. Two books that were just beyond the scope of my project but that I would like to study further are Heather McGhee's *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, and Dorothy A. Brown's *The Whiteness of Wealth: How the Tax System Impoverishes Black Americans – and How We Can Fix It*. Some cities in the United States are considering reparations and could be a resource.

A second topic that could be researched further and was mentioned to me on more than one occasion in development is the exploration of other American racial groups that have experienced racial trauma historically. My hope is that the manual can be used to discover historic racist events that have affected any group in addition to indigenous, Black, and Brown Americans. But perhaps more in-depth research of racist policies against other minority groups would be helpful.

A third topic that could be researched is a better understanding and appreciation for indigenous Americans. How do you research people who have lived and migrated from South America through Central America and into North America and back for tens of thousands of

years? Where do you start or stop? How many nations do you study? Languages? Dialects? Faiths? How many interactions do you research, from conquistadors to explorers, to monks and priests on mission trips, to white settlers? How can you research the impact of generational trauma to indigenous peoples force-marched on the Trails of Tears, losing their land, forced to live on reservations? What about researching the impact of generational trauma from Christian boarding schools where children were taken from their families, sent sometimes thousands of miles away, their sacred hair cut short, put into uniforms and unable to wear their own clothes, punished for speaking their own language, not knowing scores if not hundreds of “students” from any number of other indigenous nations, and too often hundreds if not thousands being killed and buried often in unmarked or erroneously marked graves. What has been the impact on indigenous peoples of racist commercial promotions, from wood-carved Indians outside of tobacco shops to stereotypically racist caricatures of sporting mascots to historically inaccurate portrayals of indigenous peoples like Pocohontas or Sacagawea? And lastly, one could study white congregations working with local indigenous nations through the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act to repatriate any human remains or sacred objects from community centers, museums, churches and grounds, and local Indian boarding schools back home to their peoples.

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