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An Ethnographic Study of the Influence of White Supremacy Culture in a Presbyterian Church (USA)

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Abstract

This study focused on the language and symbolism concerning white supremacy and anti-racism used in the context of worship services, devotionals, and interviews within a white-dominant church in North Carolina—Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church (GCPC). Based on Pierre Bourdieu's idea of embodiment and Bronwyn Davies's theory on subject positioning, the race, gender, and religion of those in this study influenced their response to white supremacy culture. The church is put in the context of its denomination, PC(USA), and how its actions subvert or perpetuate white supremacy culture. Due to COVID-19, the majority of this project occurred online through Zoom and worship services uploaded to YouTube, which allowed for participant-observation and semi-structured interviews with staff members and congregants. GCPC addressed white supremacy in worship services, devotions, and church-sponsored events; the staff worked to emphasize how they and the congregation cannot ignore white supremacy. Throughout services, multiple images of Jesus as a man of color were used to redefine the prototypical image of Jesus within the congregation. The worship services followed a specific order that created flexibility for church leaders to emphasize their own beliefs surrounding how and why white supremacy is still prevalent. I found the repetition of phrases such as "siblings in Christ," "racism is in our bodies," and "take action" contributed to the internalization of deconstructing white supremacy as individuals and as a congregation. Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church is attempting to subvert white supremacy culture through language and symbols, which contributes to their anti-racist rhetoric.

1. Introduction

In this study, I observed Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church and how they confront and deconstruct white supremacy as a white-dominant church that considers itself largely progressive. I came into my research with the question "How is Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church perpetuating and/or subverting white supremacy culture?" This ethnography looks at how symbols and language are used to embody white supremacy and anti-racism. This ethnography focuses on the language used within the context of worship services, devotionals, and classes; researches how white supremacy has been incorporated into churches; and examines the effects of white supremacy on a white-dominant congregation in North Carolina. Grace Covenant uses their mission statement to guide their principles, values, teachings, and works, the mission statement announces, "At GCPC our faith calls us to practice Theological Curiosity, Moral Courage, Abundant Compassion, Beloved Community. With God's help, we are seeking our transformation and the healing of the world."[1]

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of embodiment and habitus along with Bronwyn Davies's theory of subject positioning influenced my analysis of white supremacy culture at Grace Covenant. The church leaders discussed how white supremacy is embodied, radical compassion, and how they must unlearn white supremacy. Their positionality as a congregation in the United States grants them a position of economic power and racial privilege. The majority of the staff and congregants are white, cisgender, and middle class. This privilege puts them closer to the prototypical United

States citizen: a white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, Protestant, educated man. The closer one is to the prototypical citizen, the harder it is to unlearn the white supremacist ideology ingrained within the United States. The prototypical image of Christ, white with European features, has been contradicted in both the language and images used by Grace Covenant. The church presents paintings of Christ as a man of color, rather than the traditional, white-washed images depicting a white man with light-colored hair and European features, in order to oppose this prototypical version of Christ by adhering to the historical record.

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church (USA) is located on Merrimon Avenue in North Asheville. Known for its well-curated and expansive garden on the front lawn, Grace Covenant (or GCPC) housed several hundred congregants on Sunday mornings until March of 2020. With COVID-19 came a major shift in how the church functioned. Worship, Sunday School, committees, and every other event traditionally held on church grounds moved online. Social isolation came hand-in-hand with social distancing, and the church worked to make community online. The church used multiple methods to cultivate community, including posting three to five devotionals online weekly. Staff members created these devotionals that lasted anywhere from three to thirteen minutes. The devotionals act as a way to connect with congregants and encourage internal reflections proposed by the staff. The church also held committee meetings over Zoom and invited church members by email and the calendar found on GCPC's website. Even though Sunday School classes were not popular before the pandemic, and that popularity has since decreased, GCPC offers adult education classes every Sunday before worship in an effort to maintain community. In addition to meetings over Zoom and an adult education class, there are groups that meet either weekly or bi-weekly; these include a group for twenty-to-thirty-year-olds, a GCPC men's group, a Bible study, and other various prayer groups.

Using participant-observation and interviews to complete an ethnography about a congregation within what is considered the most progressive Presbyterian sect, I studied how Grace Covenant addresses white supremacy culture from their position as a white-dominant congregation and what they can do to eliminate white supremacy culture. I saw this in worship services, devotionals, church-sponsored events, and one-on-one interviews with staff. I found the repetition of particular phrases contributed to the church's anti-racist rhetoric by focusing on language and symbols used in these religious settings. The staff used "siblings in Christ," "mutual liberation," and "take action," to encourage congregants and themselves to examine their own internalized white supremacy and determine what they can do to contribute to a more equitable society. Developed by French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, embodiment is put in the context of practice: how it is developed, internalized, and enacted. The body acts as a unifying force of social practices and contexts.[2] In order to analyze and understand embodiment and habitus, white supremacy culture's characteristics must be examined and evaluated. Questioning the role of these characteristics is a major method in this process. Habitus includes the recognition of how white supremacy culture has been embodied by the staff and congregants. To study this in detail requires an examination of my own internalized white supremacy; there is no avoiding the study's self-reflexivity.

Reverend Doctor Marcia Mount Shoop is the senior pastor and head of staff at Grace Covenant since July 2016. Reverend Mount Shoop grew up in the Presbyterian church, and her family has been Presbyterian for generations. When asked about her religious background, Reverend Mount Shoop proudly declares, Presbyterianism is in her blood—it is an inseparable part of her. More often than not, she is the one leading worship and giving sermons on Sunday morning. Reverend Mount Shoop has also spearheaded the effort to recognize and deconstruct white supremacy culture at GCPC, though this effort began before her appointment. Reverend Doctor Richard Coble has been the associate pastor at GCPC since 2017; his responsibilities include congregational care and adult formation, while also teaching classes at Lexington Theological Seminary. Despite growing up in the Southern Baptist church, Reverend Coble joined the Presbyterian church when he encountered Presbyterian theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. As the father of a five-year-old and an infant, Reverend Coble spends much of his time working from home while caring for his family. Director of Formation for Children, Youth, and Their Families, Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks, grew up a third-generation Presbyterian and is originally from Utah. She serves on the board of More Light Presbyterians, a national organization aimed at making way for LGBTQIA+ persons to be active in the church, while also "help[ing] congregations and [their] members build their capacity and develop new skills to deepen their welcome to LGBTQIA+ people within their churches and in their wider communities."[3] These three staff members acted as my key informants over the past year as I observed and participated in worship. They put aside time for me to interview them, in which I asked them questions about their personal theological beliefs, how they see white supremacy culture in their own lives, and their hopes for deconstructing white supremacy culture in the church and their own lives.

2. Defining White Supremacy Culture

At Grace Covenant, the ministers turn to Dr. Tema Okun's collaborative definition of white supremacy culture: "the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value."[4] This acts as the basis for much of their teachings, sermons, and overall theology. One of the most striking examples is the worship service immediately following January 6, 2021, the attack on the Capitol. In this service, the senior pastor, Marcia Mount Shoop, referred to this event as "a bout of demonic possession of whiteness and the chronically diseased state of a nation in the grip of its legion of manifestations."[5]

The definition of white supremacy culture is expansive, and the full definition is as follows: "White supremacy culture is the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value. It teaches us that Blackness is not only valueless but also dangerous and threatening. It teaches us that Indigenous people and communities no longer exist, or if they do, they are to be exoticized and romanticized or culturally appropriated as we continue to violate treaties, land rights, and humanity. It teaches us that people south of the border are 'illegal.' It teaches us that Arabs are Muslim and that Muslim is 'terrorist.' It teaches us that people of Chinese and Japanese descent are both indistinguishable and threatening as the reason for Covid. It pits other races and racial groups against each other while always defining them as inferior to the white group."[6]

In addition to this definition, Dr. Okun identifies fifteen characteristics of white supremacy culture, some of them adapted from Daniel Buford, a lead researcher of white supremacy with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. These characteristics include perfectionism, sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, only one right way, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, I'm the only one, progress is better and more, objectivity, and a right to comfort. For clarification, only one right way refers to the idea that there is only one way to do things, and if people adapt to it, they will also see it as the only right way. If those not already using this "right way," there must be something wrong with them that makes them inferior. This can be seen in the missionary work aimed at converting non-Christians, oftentimes people of color, to Christianity. Fear of open conflict is regarding individuals falling back on politeness to avoid conflict, and when this is not possible, blame the individual raising the issue rather than investigating the issue at hand. Right to comfort is one of the trickier ones for white people to identify in day-to-day life; Dr. Okun defines it as "the belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort (another aspect of valuing 'logic' over emotion)."[7]An example of this that GCPC staff discusses is white people avoiding discussions of race, power, and discrimination because it does not immediately harm us, a result of white supremacy.

The characteristics focused on within this study are right to comfort, one right way, objectivity, fear of (open) conflict, and I'm the only one. All fifteen characteristics overlap and intertwine in their creation of white supremacy culture but focusing on several rather than all allows for me to explore the selected characteristics in-depth while also acknowledging the connections between them. Each characteristic is put in the context of both my ethnographic fieldwork and the writing of Dr. Tema Okun, supporting my argument that Grace Covenant is trying to subvert white supremacy culture. This subversion occurs in worship services, art, interviews, classes, church-sponsored events, and devotionals through the usage of art illustrating Christ as a man of color and anti-racist rhetoric.

Figure 1, Fifteen characteristics as poison[8]

3. Right to Comfort

January sixth, 2021 exemplified the stronghold white supremacy has in the United States. It is not something that can be dismissed as a thing of the past due to the election of Barack Obama as president. This overt, forceful act reinforced the influence white supremacy has in multiple aspects of the United States as Reverend Mount Shoop states in her sermon. One of these aspects is Christianity. The first service I watched was from January tenth and was entitled "All Together Now." Due to COVID-19, worship was virtual with it being live-streamed on YouTube where anyone, congregants or not, could watch it at a later time. With a countdown to the beginning of worship in the left-hand corner of the screen, an image from the insurrection is left on the screen for viewers to inspect. Viewers are confronted with the events of sixth and its repercussions, no matter if they want to think about it or not while waiting for worship.

Figure 2, Image from January 6 Capitol insurrection[9]

Before the call to worship, which acts as the gathering of congregants to worship God together, there is a prelude played by the director of music ministries, Jeff Jones, who plays "The Water is Wide" on the piano in the sanctuary while the camera focuses on his profile. As he continues to play, the video moves to the Johnson family, a couple with gray hair lighting a white candle on their mantle in their own home. A white candle carries heavy symbolism in Christianity; it is called the Christ candle and sits at the center of the Advent wreath, and with its use throughout the year, it represents the presence of Christ. The camera zooms in on the candle sitting to the left of an image of Mary and Christ.

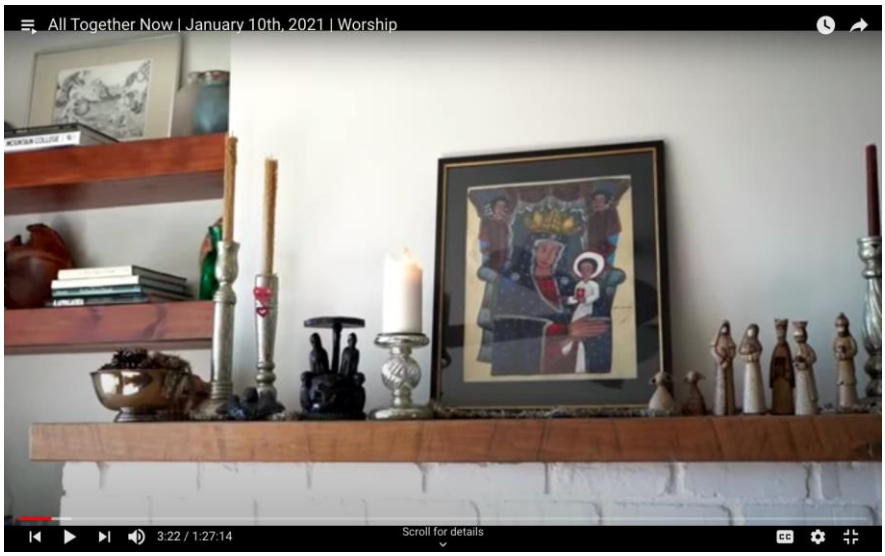

Figure 3, Mary and Christ[10]

Within the January tenth worship service, Reverend Mount Shoop addresses the congregation with the phrase "siblings in Christ" to unite those watching and are isolated from one another. Calling the congregants children of Christ is not unusual but using "siblings" rather than "brothers and sisters" is more inclusive. A phrase that is meant to be inclusive and unifying being adapted to use a gender-neutral term speaks to Grace Covenant's dedication to unlearning white supremacy culture, which includes patriarchal and cisheteronormative structures.[11] Discussing this privately with Amy Kim, she tells me white supremacy culture thrives on hierarchical structures of power because it hoards the power at the top and keeps those without power from creating systemic change.

Moving from the call to worship, one of the congregants from their own home invites the congregation to "prepare [their] hearts with a moment of silence." Eyes closed, breath drawn in, the congregation is expected to follow the lead of the congregant. Preparing one's heart is not just a throwaway phrase, but a call for the congregation to recenter themselves by regulating their breathing to be fully present in worship. One of the more interactive portions of the service, those watching live are invited to answer questions posed by Grace Covenant staff in the YouTube chat. The first question is "what are some of the things that stand in your way of believing God fully loves who you are?" Most of the responses are one-worded like anger, old circumstances, and self-doubt. Reverend Richard Coble reads the responses out loud as they come into the chat. The second question is "What are some things that stand in your way of seeing others as children of God?" Some answers were judgement, racism, white supremacist culture, and anger. While both questions are meant to be self-reflexive, the second one brings into consideration one's own bias against others. It also shows that white supremacy is not a topic new to the church or something that is avoided amongst non-staff members. The service may be taking place virtually, but the congregation is still a connected being.

"The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God" follows the scripture reading, which indicates the transition into the second phase of worship: hearing the Word of God. The sermon comes immediately after the scripture. Reverend Mount Shoop entitled it "All Together Now" after the Beatles song. The screen changes to different translations of the title. She uses the song to illustrate the idea that when the destructive events occur, such as the Capitol insurrection, communities lean into the idea of oneness, peace, and harmony. However, she says "[these] are dangerous aspirations

in a society unwilling to deal with its most deadly demons. Those demons take possession of our aspirations and turn them to an annihilating purpose." Reverend Mount Shoop states "the demon of whiteness is not a biological reality; it is a cultural reality. Unity evoked as an aspiration by whiteness is unity without mutual liberation." She argues colonization and genocide are about oneness and unity. Connecting this to the scripture read earlier, she reminds the congregation that today's scripture from Acts was written about the early church by the apostle Paul, someone who was set free from "his addiction to one right way." She then proposes the question "how is your baptism and my baptism still seeking its deepest truth in the way we are together now?" The question is followed by *Insider's* clip of people entering the Capitol on January sixth. "The optics of white insurrection trouble us moderate progressive white people, and well they should." She says whiteness "distracts and deflects by intellectualization."[12]

Even with these references to aspects of white supremacy culture (oneness, one right way, and intellectualization), comparing whiteness to a demon puts distance between the white congregants and white supremacy culture. Demons are thought of as evil supernatural beings, and in Christian mythology they are thought to be capable of possessing people, and the only way to remove them was through exorcism by ministers or priests. Reverend Mount Shoop uses the metaphor of demons as a way of saying that white supremacy is something that can be isolated and removed from an individual. This appears contradictory to the idea of white supremacy being embodied and contributes to one's habitus. Habitus is the way a person presents their worldview, which is based on their background, through receiving and reacting to internal and external factors. Examples of habitus are how one holds themselves; how one speaks to someone of a different class, race, or gender; and one's taste in cultural aspects such as art, music, and food. In this context, habitus is used to understand and analyze white supremacy culture as it is learned, ingrained, and then beginning to be unlearned by the staff and congregants. Turning white supremacy into the metaphor of being a demon minimizes the responsibility and self-accountability of the staff and congregants. The habitus of the staff and congregants is set aside when white supremacy is turned into a demon; the demon is painted in the sermon as something separate from them when white supremacy is within them.

Reverend Mount Shoop says that "white Christians struggle to embrace and embody the whole truth of the faith we claim is ours." In the context of her sermon, she is referring to Christ being a man of color and him preaching about looking out for those who are marginalized. Her usage of the word "embody" and her metaphor of the demon creates a tension between the two. She is describing white supremacy as something that has invaded us, something that implies our initial ignorance until we were confronted with white supremacy at some point. Yet if white supremacy creates a culture, then it itself is embodied by those who are within this culture. This may be done unconsciously or without recognition of all the harm white supremacy culture causes, and it is normalized to such a level that parts of it seem insignificant. White supremacy culture is not this thing that is easily identified as an evil entity when it has seeped into our government, classrooms, museums, and religious spaces. To equate white supremacy culture with something that can be exorcised reduces its influence and entanglement with the church's habitus.

Reverend Mount Shoop argues "we cannot look at January sixth as a dark day, but as a stark day." She directly calls out the use of the darkness metaphor and its association with things that are considered bad. She concludes with "[my] Presbyterian siblings…are trying to distance and shame" themselves. She says, "breathe my dear siblings, and remember…remember Jesus did not hang on that cross so we can spend our lives ruminating and equivocating." She is using the execution of Jesus as a call to action for the majority-white congregation. It also acts as a callback to the idea of white supremacy culture including intellectualization and using objectivity as a tool of creating distance. She points out that as a white congregation, regardless of political leaning, they cannot distance themselves from overt white supremacy when the United States is built on racial divisions and hierarchies.

The Presbyterian church is not innocent of perpetuating discrimination. Looking at the Presbyterian church during the Civil War, there was only one Presbyterian denomination, and it split into two: the United Presbyterian Church of the USA and the Presbyterian Church of the US. The UPCUSA was more common in the north and supported the abolition of slavery while the PCUS, largely in the south, supported the continuation of slavery. Since then, churches have dropped out of these denominations to be non-denominational or create a new one, and these two denominations eventually reunited in 1983 with the creation of the PC(USA). To this day, the PC(USA) is the largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States. Since its 1983 reunification, the PC(USA) has heavily debated the morality of same-gender relationships. It was not until 2018 that the PC(USA) issued a statement acknowledging and apologizing for 1) their use of the phrase "religious freedom" in denying human rights, 2) being unwelcoming of those who are transgender and gender non-conforming, and 3) being unwelcoming of queer parishioners.[13] They are still considered the most progressive Presbyterian denomination.

A country built on stolen land and exploited labor, the white supremacy of the United States contributes to one's habitus. Equating the savior of Christianity with whiteness does little to dissuade white supremacy culture according to my key participants. Habitus contributes to how one perceives and reacts to the world due to it containing socialized behaviors.[14] Habitus can be developed in any social setting, which includes religious spaces. This development comes

through repetition and belief in the church's teachings. Grace Covenant using images of Jesus depicted as a man of color is an intentional action to move the congregation's understanding away from the idea of a white savior. The image seen in this worship service depicts Christ and Mary as people of color, which is not the most common depiction of Christ in the United States. (Note: In my ethnography, when referring to the divine Son of God, I will use Christ rather than Jesus. This allows for a distinction by using "Jesus" when referring to the historical figure). The most common depiction[15] would be the 1941 "Head of Christ."

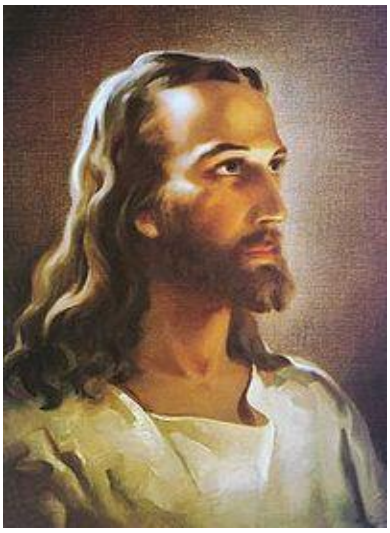

Figure 4, "Head of Christ," Warner Sallman, 1941[16]

A painting widely distributed after World War II, it shows Christ as a white man with light hair and light skin. It was often hung in churches as a reminder of their savior, but it is not an accurate representation of him. Born in what is now the Middle East, Jesus would have been a man of color, not a white man. However, the wide and decades-long distribution of "Head of Christ" has led to the internalization of Jesus being thought of as a white man. The separation of Jesus's life, actions, and eventual execution from his race creates a dissonance in the United States.[17] Within a white-dominant congregation, each person comes with their own religious background and imagined version of Christ. Grace Covenant is trying to provide an alternative with a more true-to-text artistic interpretation of Christ. Something in my fieldwork that I had not thought to be expecting was the inclusion of images of Christ. However, it quickly became apparent that due to COVID and worship occurring online images play a more important role than ever. Images act as a form of communication with their own emphasis in worship and devotionals. At the beginning of the worship services, the family would say the call of worship in their home while a painting of Christ as a man of color sits behind them. There is power in this painting. Grace Covenant is quick to point out the significance of how Christ is depicted. This painting confronts and threatens the classical image of Jesus as a white man that we as a country are familiar with. While evangelism may seem extreme within Grace Covenant, a more moderately liberal church, the staff argues that they cannot distance themselves from explicitly white supremacist groups because they carry their own racism and ideas of white supremacy due to living in a society dictated by racial division.

4. One Right Way and Objectivity

Not hiding behind theological arguments or church rhetoric, Amy Kim readily shares her opinions on white supremacy culture and the church. This was incredibly refreshing as it offered a different way of talking about this difficult and sensitive topic. Talking to other church leaders, I observed more pauses as words were carefully chosen and references to theological frameworks were more prevalent than I did when talking to Amy Kim. She is quick to point out the white supremacy is an internalized, embodied concept that creates unachievable, inaccessible, and discriminatory ideals. She believes white supremacy is embodied through images of Christ as a white man and a lack of recognition surrounding the discriminatory history of the Presbyterian Church.

It is 10:30 a.m. on a Friday. Sitting at my desk, Zoom call open, I stare blurry-eyed into the camera. This is my second interview with someone from GCPC, and I am nervous for how it will go. I am not used to discussing white supremacy, largely due to my white privilege. Speaking about it in a religious context, a religious setting I grew up in, does give me some insight into what this church is like. As someone who grew up very involved in a church, my religious beliefs and practices acted as the initial factor that connected me and the other congregants. Along with this, being a white cisgender heterosexual-presenting student allowed me to blend into the congregation and contribute to a homogenous group before leaving the church upon my high school graduation. Now, I am returning to the PC(USA) with an academic, anthropological perspective. Looking at Professor of Education Bronwyn Davies's definition of subject positioning, which refers to the identity one creates in society due to their intersecting identities, [18] an individual's religious identity is more prevalent than other aspects of their identity when they are in church, but the other aspects are not negated or forgotten; rather, they contribute to the individual's worldview and behavior within this setting. Like Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality (the connection between socialized categories of identity, which can contribute to systems of discrimination), subject positioning views one's identity as dynamic and something that has components that may be emphasized in different settings. Grace Covenant is working to challenge congregational conformity as they recognize religion as the first factor that connects them, which allows the staff to use theological frameworks in their argument against white supremacy culture, but they also argue that race in any situation is the first part of one's identity that determines their worldview.

It is 10:37 and I am the only one on Zoom. I shoot a quick text to Amy Kim, asking her if she still wants to meet today. An instant apology and a promise to meet in ten minutes. At 11, GCPC.org logs onto the Zoom call. Another minute and Amy Kim's camera flips on, shining a ray of sunshine brighter than all my room's lights. Reintroducing ourselves and going over the IRB consent form she had filled out, she appears at ease as she lounges outside on her deck with her iPhone propped up. Her tie-dyed shirt advertises a church event with a large heart outlined in white over the tie-dye. Behind her is a brick wall and hill sparsely covered with small trees. After asking how she got involved at Grace Covenant and her role there, I ask "How would you define white supremacy and white supremacy culture?" Having attended worship online with them since February, I was well aware that the church leaders did not shy away from addressing Christianity's relationship, past and present, with white supremacy. Even with this information, I did not know how this question would be received when asked so directly.

Amy Kim's immediate response was a huff of laughter followed by "Ohhh…everything, everywhere. I think it's the all-consuming, um, invisible standard that everybody has decided is…is the ideal, whether they want to admit it or not." To connect it to the church, I ask if she considers it to be an issue in the PC(USA). She affirms that it is, and she can see it in her family's history as well. She tells me, "…[T]he education that my grandfather was afforded was a white savior [pause] issue. Right? Like the Presbyterians were like 'we're going to go help those poor people and make them better by educating them,' and, 'don't they want that? Isn't that what everyone wants, is to be a bit more educated?'" Growing up as a woman of color in Utah, she was raised in a Presbyterian church. This was largely due to Presbyterians providing education for those they thought needed their teachings, including her grandfather.

As we continue to discuss how we came to recognize that white supremacy is not only an issue of the past in the PC(USA), no matter how progressive the church, she says, "Right and the, the approach that [Presbyterians] have wasn't really about [the people being "helped"], it was about us, you know? ["Oh, yeah. It was all about us"] And reinforcing how good we are, how much better we are, I mean, just in all the ways." This is an example of the characteristic of only one right way in that the Presbyterians thought their way was the best and everything in contrast is inferior. I shared that the first time I began to see the issue of white saviorism was when I was in high school. Involved in a youth group, we did a lot of mission work that entailed us traveling to a lower income area and doing a week's worth of work then leaving. It may be helpful at the time, but it is does not contribute to long-lasting change; it acted as a band-aid on a much larger issue that was going unaddressed. With her grandfather's conversion being Amy Kim's first insight into Presbyterian history, when watching GCPC worship services to decide if she wanted to work there, she observed, "There was very specific talk [in GCPC services] against white supremacy, right? That white supremacy is named in every service, and it's not coded, right? It's not in words people could spin as something else, which I think many, many, many people do to keep people happy." Transparency is a large issue we have both seen in the PC(USA), her as a church leader and staff member, me as a congregant. She tells me that she sees those in leadership positions with the higher education degrees have been taught that "professionalism means detachment from emotions," [19] something that falls into white supremacy culture under objectivity.

Out of the hour-long interview, the quotes included above are some that I believe to be the most telling. The missionary practices and methods carried out often went without question, and these practices and methods still going unquestioned leads to them being considered appropriate rather than harmful. Continuing work that mirrors these historical practices shows that it is still seen as the one right way. Regardless of how progressive the denomination believes itself to be, it continues to perpetuate white supremacy culture as an institution created in white supremacist

colonization and imperialism. Grace Covenant is working to challenge congregational conformity as they recognize religion as the first factor that connects them, which allows the staff to use theological frameworks in their argument against white supremacy culture, but they also argue that race in any situation is the first part of one's identity that determines their worldview. Amy Kim's and my worldviews and understanding of the PC(USA) differed due to our race. She has a personal connection to the PC(USA) perpetuating white supremacy culture through conversion and saviorism that the church thought was necessary. I did not recognize the problems of this until I was participating in international mission work in high school. It took several more years for me to learn how to articulate them, and that was primarily due to my white privilege. Neither of us can be objective when discussing white supremacy culture due to our positionality. Amy Kim's positionality as a Hispanic woman who grew up in the PC(USA) and has only been at GCPC for less than two years influences how she sees the work done by GCPC in their efforts to subvert white supremacy culture.

5. Presbyterianism 101

It is 8:58 on a Sunday morning, and I am staring at the Zoom link for "Presbyterianism 101." *I told Richard I would be there,* I remind myself as I debate closing my computer and going back to bed. 8:59. Time to join the Zoom call. It requires a passcode that I don't have. Scanning through my emails, I finally find the passcode and log into the meeting. Staring through my screen are Grace Covenant's two ministers, Reverend Coble and Reverend Mount Shoop, along with ten other adults. Other folks in the Zoom call are older and white as well. Several of the adults are familiar from previous church events and worship services, and I can already see several of them struggling to figure out how to unmute themselves and others asking how to get to the chat.

After Reverend Coble introduces the class as an introduction to the Presbyterian denomination for new members and anyone else who is interested in the church history, everyone is invited to share their name, how long they've been a part of the Grace Covenant community, how long they've been a Presbyterian (if they are), and a word they associate with Presbyterianism. Reverend Mount Shoop and I are some of the few lifelong Presbyterians with most being raised Southern Baptist or Catholic with another having been Methodist and another Jewish. Some of the words thrown out are heritage, government, and polity. It seems like these folks already have an idea of how the Presbyterian church functions.

This Sunday's class is dedicated to looking at the Book of Confessions, each confession being a statement of belief. Containing eleven confessions beginning with the Nicene Creed and ending with the Confession of Belhar, these statements contradict one another and emphasize different theological beliefs. 473 pages, the Book of Confessions is an intensive document that acts as a basis for the PC(USA) along with the equally important Book of Order.[20] I've seen both of these books scattered around my house for years, but I never bothered to open them. They always seemed dull and irrelevant to me. I went to church, Sunday School, youth group, church trips, workdays, and other church events. I felt no need to read the books that outline the PC(USA)'s beliefs and organization. This class is meant to pay attention to these two books and their role in structuring the church. We are put into breakout rooms to discuss how the Book of Confession guides Presbyterians. The answer my group provided was that it helps the church remain relevant and adapt to changes in the world after several minutes of silence. No one was eager to lead to group or be the first to share their opinion. Once someone eventually shared their own thoughts, we went around the room and everyone got a chance to speak. After coming back together as a whole group, Reverend Coble brought up how long the process is to add confessions to the book. He cites the most recent addition, the Confession of Belhar, which was introduced in 1982 and not approved until 2016. Reverend Mount Shoop steps in to say, "the church has been appropriated by white supremacy."[21] Using the term the church in this context, it acts as a metonymy; it refers to the corruption of Christianity. However, I wonder if it is possible to separate Christianity from white supremacy culture when Christianity has become ingrained in white supremacy culture.

Ending the class, Richard asks for anyone who feels moved by the Spirit to read from the Confession of Belhar as a closing prayer. The reading waffles between three of the attendees while the rest observe. Others nod along and when the reading is over, one or two say "Amen." These actions of emphasis illustrate the faith of those agreeing; the confession resonates with them and their own beliefs. There is a multitude of reasons why people do not read aloud even when the Spirit has been invoked. The reason that has influenced my decision to not read this confession as well as the Apostles' Creed in weekly services has been the same one for years; I simply do not believe I can read something considered a profession of faith when I do not share the same beliefs. Among those who did read, a lot of emotion went into their delivery with one woman getting close to tears when she read "We believe […] that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right; that the church must therefore stand by people in any form

of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream…"[22] There is an evident strongly-held belief within the class that Christianity is something that can return to the teachings of Christ and be used to dismantle white supremacy culture even though it had been used to build white supremacy culture.

6. Objectivity & Fear of (Open) Conflict

Since the beginning of this ethnography, I've been debating how much I share of my own religious beliefs with those in the church. I knew I couldn't avoid discussing being raised in the church and sharing the fact that all the churches I worshipped at included my mom as one of the preachers. I knew I would be asked if I was worshipping with anyone in Asheville, so I was prepared to say I drifted from the church since coming to college. Saying anything more than that was where I got stuck. Do I say I associated moving to college with not having to go to church anymore? Do I say I questioned the Presbyterian church's teachings to the point that I was considered a disruption in the church? I didn't know where to draw the boundary. I wanted to remain as objective as possible during this ethnography, but I knew ultimate objectivity was impossible.

The churches I've been a part of growing up did little to explain or recognize the nuance of their religious ideology or its impact on one's life and the larger society. Grace Covenant is the exact opposite. They seek out the discussions and explanations for how their religion impacts their community and the larger world as well. Listening to and interviewing the staff I heard their own questions of their faith and the Bible; they never seemed to shy away from questioning what they were reading and what they had been taught. After noticing this for several months, I impulsively decided to bring it up when I was getting lunch with Amy Kim over the summer. The former Director of Children and Family Ministries (now Director of Formation for Children, Youth, and Their Families), Amy Kim has not shied away from sharing her opinions with me whenever we've talked. Her opinions include critiques of the church, social justice enacted through the congregation, and even how the staff works as a group. This was completely unfamiliar to me. I'm used to critiques being spoken behind closed doors and a lack of communication surrounding conflicts within the church. Conflicts were often dealt with privately without providing a clear resolution for the larger congregation. Talking to Amy Kim, I found that wasn't the case here.

I told her that one of the major reasons I left the church was because of the hierarchies amongst staff and congregants. I confided that I had seen a multitude of instances of hypocrisy occurring, which was often based in racism, sexism, and queerphobia. I didn't feel comfortable in the church anymore and continued to ask intentionally goading questions about Christian theology. Asking her about hierarchies in the church and the tension they may cause, Amy Kim brings up her very intentional choice to not be ordained. She has been working in ministry for twenty years and has chosen time and time again to continue working without the title of "reverend."

She tells me,

> I understand the privileges I get as a part of [becoming a reverend] and some of the things I wish I could do, but also, I'm not convinced that's the way God needs me to show up. And I feel like in a lot of ways I have been more accessible than the people who have the MDiv [Masters of Divinity] and all the things. I mean, I think you can use your privilege for good, but, again, a privilege is a privilege. It's a tangled web that we're constantly trying to figure that out […] find me a place where you can push these assumptions […] I have found that here.[23]

Becoming a reverend comes with levels of conforming to standards of theological higher education. Like any other graduate program, a student takes the required courses along with electives to fulfill their interests. They complete their degree with a thesis, but they also complete a portfolio that is approved by the department's professors. This portfolio includes personal statements on where the student believes they belong in ministry. There is a level of oversight to this that Amy Kim is not comfortable with. Submitting one's personal beliefs for inspection and approval implies essential conformity to an established social and religious order that is inherently rooted in white supremacy—both from an academic and religious standpoint. However, having an MDiv provides one more job opportunity and authority, much like other master's degrees. To obtain the title of "reverend," one must have an MDiv and be ordained by a church; the ordination process includes a test, interviews, and a vote by a selected few within the denomination. Continuing, Amy Kim then says,

> Even with Marica, she constantly calls herself the boss. I totally understand all of those things. That's not true in my life. She is my supervisor […] No one's my boss, and even polity-wise we wouldn't say she's my boss. But I also understand from a female perspective why it's helpful for her to say that she's the boss. I get that it is something she has earned in this system and is helpful for people to hear.[24]

Bringing in the analogy of it being a tangled web, there is the difficulty of trying to dismantle white supremacy from within a white supremacist institution. Getting an MDiv brings one further into the institution and contributes to it monetarily and academically, but it provides one with a higher position within the Christian hierarchy. It brings up the question "can you change the system from within?" This is something the staff of Grace Covenant has been wrestling with for several years now and they are no closer to formulating a definitive answer. Having or not having an MDiv contributes to one's positionality.

I ended up deciding to remain vague with Amy Kim and say that I stopped worshipping with a congregation once I came to college, but my interest in this research topic has drawn me back in. No one has questioned me further, and my (largely irrational) fear that someone was going to stand up and call me an imposter never came to fruition. I did not want to cause any conflict. At this point in my research, I have not fully disclosed my personal religious beliefs, and I doubt I will. I don't consider this to be lying or misleading because, frankly, I don't even know what exactly I believe, much less how to articulate that in-depth. I have been most open with Amy Kim when bringing up my own questions about how the church runs and the power held within it. From her perspective, I am sure I come across as the stereotypical preacher's kid with a lot of pent-up anger. Honestly, she's not wrong. We both have our own issues with the church and have taken different approaches to addressing them. I distanced myself from the church for several years and now approach it from an academic, anthropological perspective; she has entered the ministry and dedicated twenty years to work with children and families in various churches while examining the white supremacy within the PC(USA) and its churches.

7. I'm the Only One

Continuing to watch Grace Covenant's worship services and devotionals (three-to-ten-minute reflections by the staff uploaded to their YouTube channel), the discussion of white supremacy became inescapable. Sermons explicitly confronted the implicit racism we as white people carry in us. To gain a better understanding of how the staff presents to the congregation what white supremacy is, I attended the virtual "Disrupting White Supremacy in Cultures and Communities: A Collaborative Conversation with Tema Okun and Rev. Tami Forte-Logan" event. Tema Okun, a social justice activist based in North Carolina and author of *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Teaching About Race and Racism to People Who Don't Want to Know*, co-hosted the event as a scholar who has studied teaching racism for over a decade. Reverend Tami Forte-Logan was the other co-host and pastor of Pharr Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Zion in Old Fort, North Carolina. She is also the Missioner for Faith 4 Justice, Asheville, an organization of faith leaders provoking justice for and with black and brown bodied people through faith and racial equity work."[25] An interfaith group, Faith 4 Justice works with two churches in Asheville that they consider to be progressive: The Cathedral of All Souls Episcopal Church and Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church.

"Disrupting White Supremacy in Cultures and Communities" was advertised as a collaborative conversation to congregations and was formatted as a lecture with a Q&A, appearing to be a Zoom meeting that was streamed through YouTube comments at the end. Hosted by GCPC, Reverend Mount Shoop acted as the moderator. I had been going back and watching the worship services and devotionals of January, and this was my first "live" event with the church. Settled into my desk, I pull out my notebook to prepare to take notes for the next two hours. The first thing I notice is the art in the center of the advertisement on the screen: a collage of Dr. Tema Okun's own art about the impact of white supremacy and the pushback against it. She and the reverends are all in their own homes but situated side-by-side on the screen. Later, when discussing her art, she says "white supremacy does not like us to be vulnerable"[26] to the nods and affirmations of Reverend Mount Shoop and Reverend Forte-Logan.

Figure 5, Collage depicting white supremacy, Tema Okun[27]

Reverend Mount Shoop introduces the event, the church by describing it as a More Light church, herself, and the speakers. She describes the event as "an invitation to stretch our collective muscles together as we imagine how to cultivate liberation that is for all people [and] to experience the body sensations of liberation from white supremacy culture in real-time."[28] Throughout the event, we are asked to take part in breathing exercises in order to "sit in the discomfort [of white supremacy], interrogate it, understand it, then [we] can grow."[29] Similar to the exercises in the January tenth service, these are meant to center us as we regulate our breathing and come to the event with a clear mind and openness to learning. Looking to leading scholar in Black theology, theologian Dr. James Cone, this event echoes his claim that "white thought on the Christian view was largely 'spiritual' and sometimes 'rational,' but usually separated from the concrete struggle of freedom in this world."[30]

Each of the event's leaders are given the opportunity to share their own thoughts on white supremacy culture, how they describe it, and where they have seen it in their own lives. Reverend Forte-Logan calls white supremacy a "gross inferiority complex" and "the Manifest Destiny mindset held by white people."[31] A Black minister located in western North Carolina, she has been working for years to fight white supremacy culture and has led many discussions like this one. Her comparing it to the Manifest Destiny, an idea that was introduced in the nineteenth century to justify American settlers expanding across North America and claiming the land as their own, speaks to the belief that white people are entitled to their desires at the sake of others still held today. This can be seen in Dr. Okun's characteristics of white supremacy culture, specifically there being only one right way (Christianity as the only religion); either/or thinking (goals must be measurable to be valuable); individualism (lack of collaboration); progress is bigger, more (success is measured in quantity); and right to comfort (refusing to acknowledge current-day white supremacy). Her description of it as a "gross inferiority complex" is explained as something that came out of the fear of losing power. White colonizers came to the United States to establish their own country on land that was already inhabited. Rather than respecting the Indigenous peoples, the colonizers used violence and disease to take over and claim the land as their own. Rather than this creating a superiority complex, Reverend Forte-Logan says it created an inferiority complex. This inferiority complex was seen in the insurrection; white supremacists feared the power of their representatives was being threatened, so they responded with violence to protect what they thought should only be theirs. The complex is not seen in only the insurrection, though that may be one of the most obvious and recent examples. It can also be seen in the images of Christ as a white man. The history and geography of his life is ignored in favor of painting him to resemble a race that has carried out centuries of oppression. He has been depicted as the prototypical United States citizen. Reverend Mount Shoop ends the event with "this is our work […] it's about mutual liberation,"[32] a phrase she repeats in worship services, devotionals, and interviews. This event acted as an introduction

for me to what framework Reverend Mount Shoop and Grace Covenant is using to illustrate, explain, and work against white supremacy culture. It also shows the church's own emphasis on embodiment and working as a collective to create change.

8. Right to Comfort Part Two

I interviewed a member who has been at Grace Covenant for close to a decade and has asked to remain anonymous. Asking them about their religious background that led to them becoming involved with GCPC, they shared they grew up in a conservative church environment, which greatly impacted their journey of discovering their sexuality. They described GCPC church as "the most progressive church [they] have ever been to" and they continue to learn about what white supremacy culture is and how it is within all of us. The first word that comes to their mind is entitlement. They see it as an "entitlement held by white-bodied people that we have to overcome" and something put in place "to protect ourselves to the detriment of people of color and minorities, and those people are disenfranchised by the systems we have put in place."

They had described themselves as no expert on the subject of white supremacy culture, but they provided a definition very close to what has been shared by Grace Covenant staff. In response to my question of where we can see white supremacy, they tell me "For the people who are resisting it […] they are feeling…realizing, admitting this means losing control of a lot of stuff. I mean of the economy, of their faith…if they start unpacking this, their entire worldview crumbles. I think the privileged white male, especially when you put in sexuality, their own security […] is threatened by this."

They cite Reverend Mount Shoop as the one who pushed the conversation to a higher and more intense level within the church, and they see the effect it has among congregants. Saying this, they move on to say "[T]his is probably spoken out of white privilege, but [white supremacy culture] is spoken about so much that…and again I don't want to discount it…and I want to say there's a lot of other things too, and this has become the one drum that is being beaten…" They continue to say they are more than willing to follow what the pastors choose to discuss, but they wonder if there are other things the church should be discussed in-depth during worship. Their acknowledgment of their own white privilege points to the effect of the church's elevation of recognizing and deconstructing white supremacy culture that they see both within themselves and with other congregants.

Their self-awareness is something they told me they did not have before hearing the sermons of Reverend Mount Shoop. However, it also speaks to something that seems to be the common thought among a large portion of congregants: they realize they have white supremacy in their bodies that they must eradicate, but they want the church to talk about other issues as well. This raises the question for me if the folks with this opinion recognize the cognitive dissonance between saying white supremacy culture is ingrained in all aspects of our society and wanting the church to talk about other issues. However, this could also be a request for discussing white supremacy culture less in the abstract of it being everywhere and the intense concentration of it being embodied and more in a middle ground of issues such as the climate crisis, COVID-19, and the educational inequality that are consequences of white supremacy. Whatever explanation there is, their request goes to show the fatigue they are feeling and them seeking the comfortability to not discuss white supremacy weekly. Discussing and dismantling white supremacy culture is not something that can be done weekly in an hour and a half long service with no repercussions appearing outside of the allotted time. All those that I talked to say these discussions stick with them throughout the week and into the next one. The conversations and introspection, along with the fatigue, appears to be unavoidable.

9. One Right Way

Recording in the dark with candlelight shining on her face, Amy Kim begins her devotion with "reclaiming the image." The camera faces her straight on, showing her from the shoulders up. Behind her is a white wall covered in paintings, the most prominent one being a three-part piece of a tree's silhouette. There is also a plant behind her right shoulder, and it seems like the background is meant to be neutral so as not to pull the attention away from Amy Kim. Posted on January 13, 2021, she says "I have needed to reclaim…God's call on me and my life. The call that I am reclaiming is the personal call."[33] The metaphor of being called by God is used to explain or justify one's actions within a ministry. In one of my interviews with a reverend, they shared how they felt called to get their MDiv. This call shaped not just their professional life but their personal faith journey. While the call is believed to come from God, it is still interpreted

by humans. According to Genesis, humans are inherently flawed due to Adam and Eve being exiled from the Garden of Eden, which means humans' interpretations can be flawed or unaligned with the teachings of the Bible. The differences in interpretation can be seen in the February eleven event and the anonymous interview. Referring to the same Bible and the same teachings, both have their own interpretations of what the church should be discussing.

Another metaphor, "faith journey" has no definitive definition within the PC(USA), but I gathered from my conversations with various Presbyterians that the general idea is that a faith journey is one's relationship with God throughout their life. Some believe it starts with baptism, others when one is engaging with the church. There are no criteria that need to be met in order to have a faith journey; in fact, some believe periods of doubt or lacking of faith are a part of the journey. If one feels called by God, it can significantly change their life and it is considered to be a powerful thing. In some of my interviews, the interviewees discussed feeling called to talk about white supremacy culture from the pulpit because they are white. They did not feel like they could stay silent on the matter. Others feel called to develop their own personal faith journey as it relates to understanding the church's role in perpetuating white supremacy.

Amy Kim brings up "how the church has abused the images of light and dark, and making darkness bad and lightness good." The church sometimes has two candles lit at the beginning of the worship service; one represents Jesus being fully human and the other represents Jesus being fully divine. One of the most famous Bible verses is Psalm 119:105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."[34] Another famous Biblical metaphor is Mark 5:16: "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."[35] Finally, there is John 8:12: "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'"[36] With this continued language surrounding lightness as being something good and holy, it places darkness as the opposite. The opposition of lightness and darkness, and, therefore, holy and unholy is not something that remains isolated in the church. As the Bible teaches Christians to live faithfully, the language of the church makes its way into secular life.[37] This crossover affects how people of different races are treated, especially in the United States where white supremacy is so prevalent.

Amy Kim invites the viewers to find a space where they can light a candle as a recognition of God's call on their life. This is meant to create a sacred space. There are no other directions given so as to allow the congregants to make the space as personal or communal as they desire. Her only request is that the space is used as a reminder of God. The candle is meant to invite God into your sacred space and make it holy. The lack of directions minimizes the inauthenticity that may be created in modeling a sacred space after that of someone else.[38] Each sacred space acts as an independent aspect within the church community. While there is this separation, each member partaking in this ritual gives them something in common: a shared belief and practice concerning a higher power. Regarding the previous mention of darkness and lightness being abused in the church, this candle is a part of a sacred space that is acting as a reclamation of the misused metaphor. She readdresses this metaphor with her inclusion of depictions of Christ as a Black man in following worship services and devotionals. These are not always directly addressed, but they are put in a prominent place behind Amy Kim. They act as a way to deconstruct white supremacy culture by replacing the prototypical image of Christ.

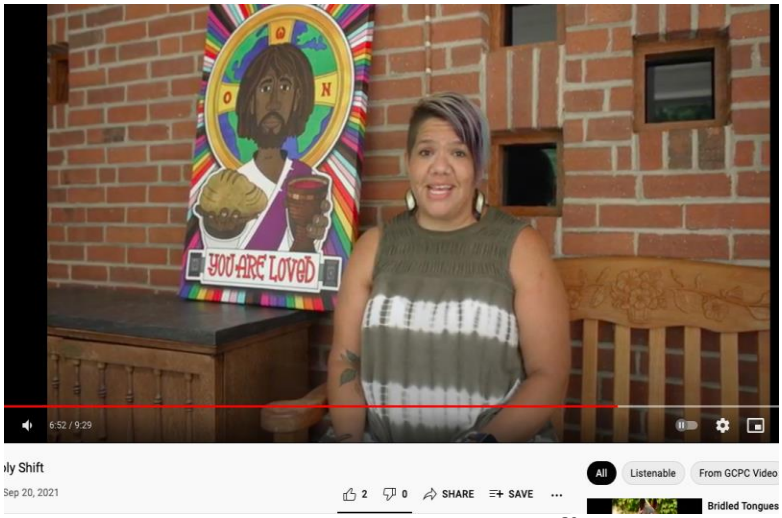

Figure 6, Christ with communion[39]

Making the images of Christ openly visible is not done only to contradict the prototypical image ingrained in the minds of the adults but to stop the perpetuation with the next generation. "Jesus imagery may have had its greatest impact in American Sunday schools, where the whiteness of Jesus became a religious fact in the psyches of children long before they could experience conversion […] beginning in the 1880s…"[40] Centuries of showing Christ as a white man cannot be eradicated easily, but GCPC's work is contributing to this eradication. Amy Kim believes this to be an important part of her work, and it is something she wants to continuing doing as a church leader. Below is an image used by the Presbyterian Church as a teaching tool in children's Sunday school classes. These images, among those with a similar depiction of Christ, were passed out for decades, acting as a major contribution for how American children envisioned Christ. Depicting a sacred figure, someone who is believed to be divine, as white plays a role in power; "The makers and followers of the white Christ had it in a variety in forms, and the opponents did not."[41]

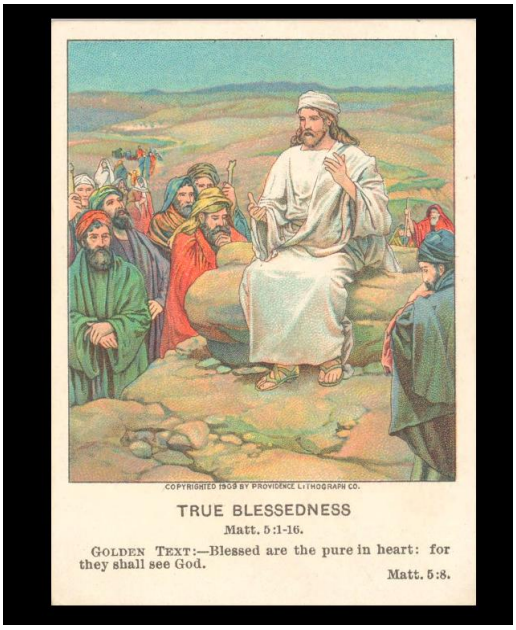

Figure 7, "True Blessedness," 1910[42]

10. I'm the Only One Part Two

Reverend Mount Shoop spends her fifteen-minute devotion discussing health and comfort while dressed in a hoodie and sitting in a rocking chair on what I believe to be her porch. All that can be seen behind her is the porch's structure and a cluster of trees, making it look like the trees are never-ending. Mixed in with her voice are the songs of the birds living in the trees. As she begins with a greeting to Grace Covenant, she leans forward to create an intimate atmosphere. It sounds like she's having a one-on-one conversation with the viewer while she shares her own weariness and thoughts on grief that has come with the climate crisis and COVID-19. She takes her time to speak to the camera and those watching. Responding to numerous requests from church members to bring back in-person worship services again, she says "[this] is a chance to practice the things we talk about as a community. To not center our own comfort, but to really learn how to regulate our nervous system, so that we don't have to make all the systems we're a part of making us comfortable all the time. That's a part of the scourge of whiteness is this right to comfort that all systems should adapt to my comfort or your comfort."[43] She refers to Grace Covenant's mission statement to emphasize their values, reminding the congregation that they "are centered on a larger world…and to be generous with one another." Her sharing that centering our own comfort over the community's comfort comes from Dr. Tami Okun's characteristics of white supremacy culture.[44]

She repeatedly uses the phrases "regulating our nervous system" and "radical compassion" to encourage the viewers to recognize their own privilege and take a step back to think of taking care of the larger community instead of solely themselves. Radical compassion acts as one of Reverend Mount Shoop's frameworks for deconstructing white supremacy culture and is seen in multiple sermons and devotionals. Her most recent sermon, October 31st, tackles the

topic of love. She frames the relationship between loving God and loving thy neighbor as a love triangle, something that is often associated with pain and jealousy. Contradicting this trope, she tells the congregation "It is about interdependence and mutual liberation, it is about vulnerability met with trustworthy support, it is about the way love shifts when there is pain, when there is harm."[45] Mutual liberation and radical compassion go hand-in-hand with them both attempting to counteract white supremacy culture. When there is work toward one, there must be work toward the other. She follows this by saying we as humans "are made for love," this is something to be shared and also to be turned inward. To embody this love, this eternal, all-powerful love, would allow it to then be turned outward to other community members.

As an encouragement and a call to action, the reverend proposes a change:

> Because if you and I, if all us human beings really believed that [God's love is with us] about ourselves, I believe the world would be a very different place than it is right now. So much of the pain we inflict on each other is the pain we feel in our own bodies, the self-loathing, the self-doubt, the feelings of inadequacy, the feelings of hurt and resentment and anger, the feeling of a lack of love in our lives.[46]

This continues her call for radical compassion, asking the congregants to try and believe in God's all-encompassing and eternal love. She believes it to be hard work due to its unfamiliarity and being practically ineffable, but this belief could begin to outweigh the pain felt in their bodies; they could embody God's love rather than the cyclical pain that has been inflicted and then embedded into the individuals. Reverend Mount Shoop argues that white supremacy culture thrives on pain and to counter this, God's love must be believed, felt, and shared instead.

11. One Right Way Part Two

A father of a five-year-old son and a one-year-old daughter, the Reverend Doctor Richard Coble is watching his son begin kindergarten during a seemingly never-ending pandemic. He worries about his son having to attend school in person when he is too young to be vaccinated. "We're hearing what the latest case numbers are, who has been exposed, which classes are being shut down […] and then weighing that with the cost of not gathering in person as well, right? The cost of his education and his socialization," Reverend Coble tells me. Asking how aware he is of pandemic precautions being a newer development, Reverend Coble says, "it's really all he's known."[47] This personal debate about his son's schooling reflects the debate going on within Grace Covenant.

This past summer, Grace Covenant hosted in-person outdoor worship services once a month. Taking place on the lawn, members and visitors were invited to bring lawn chairs and blankets for worship. Changes to traditional worship practices were made such as no physical contact during the passing of the peace, masks had to be worn at all times, and the choir was replaced by a soloist. As the number of cases decreased, the more hopeful the staff became for having more consistent in-person services. Then cases spiked. The announcement of hybrid worship services in the sanctuary was revoked and all outdoor services stopped.

Reverend Coble believes accessibility to be a necessity in conducting worship. Teaching "Pastoral Care in the Digital Age" at Lexington Theological Seminary, he recommends the article "The 'Reopen Churches' Conversation: Disabilities and the Margins" by Ph.D. student Topher Endress. During Covid, members have been asking for the church to be reopened for worship, classes, and committees. Staff has refused based on how opening would limit who can participate and how they would do so. Reflecting on how accessibility has not been a large discussion in the church before, Reverend Coble says, "I think we've all learned to live with a certain amount of risk in our lives, […] and y'know, white communities, that is something we've done; we've buffered ourselves away from living with risk to the expense of other communities." He refers to Endress's paper as evidence of how churches contribute to hierarchies of power with little effort to disengage from these hierarchies. Endress argues,

> Until the church can be a place which imagines a future for disabled lives, and can hold space for disabled experience as informative, constructive, and prophetic, we will not find safety in returning to church. Returning to churches uncritically, even if focused on health precautions, serves only to reify the position of disabled people as perpetual outsiders, maintaining their bodies as sites of charity and service rather than welcoming them in as full and equal participants.[48]

This belief is something Reverend Coble brings into Grace Covenant as he, along with other staff members, rebuke the argument that the church is not strong or whole without in-person worship. Grace Covenant's worship leaders see

accessibility as an issue that intersects with white supremacy. One cannot be discussed without the other; otherwise, the conversation is not recognizing all that these decisions affect. They continue to advocate for hybrid worship services and, since this interview in early September, have installed twelve televisions into their sanctuary. These are meant to give folks worshipping virtually a more integrated way to participate and be a part of worship. Reverend Coble shared the following slide that he had used in worship to emphasize the staff's stance on in-person worship during COVID-19 and how that is directly connected to white supremacy. He shared with me an image he created to use in worship to explain why they are not having indoor worship for the foreseeable future.

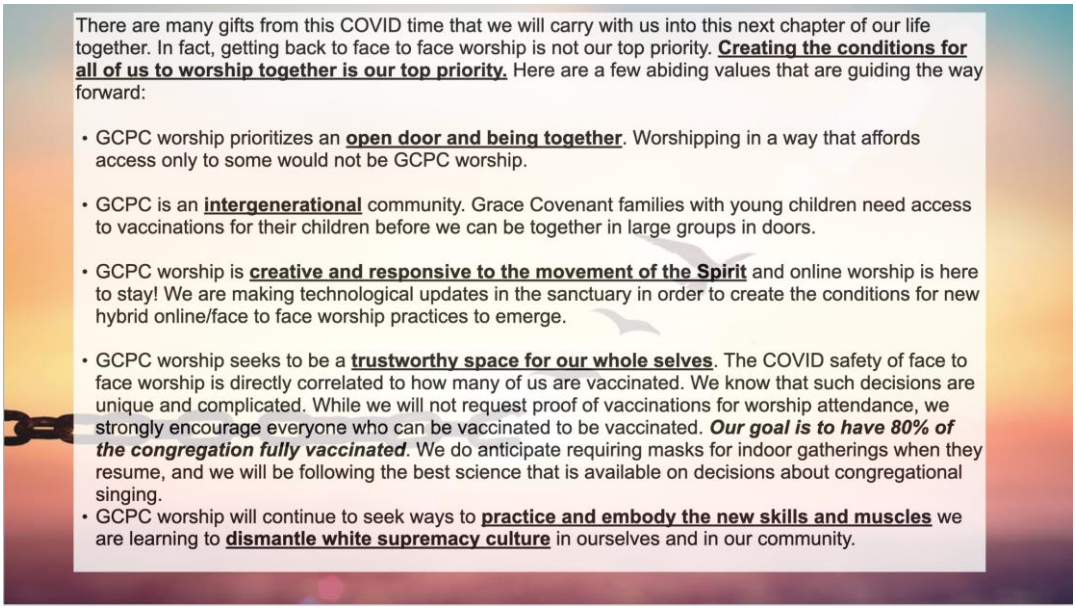

Figure 8, Sermon image: worshipping together, 2021[49]

12. Conclusion

White supremacy culture is pervasive, and its power is unavoidable in the United States. However, that does not mean work done to deconstruct it is useless. White supremacy is taught, internalized, and embodied through many avenues, and the church is not exempt. Christianity has been used as a tool of colonization and imperialism since the beginning of Europeans coming to what is now known as the United States. To ignore this history as well as the harm it continues to cause is to turn a blind eye to the power it holds. Those in the church must work to reengage themselves their whole selves—their bodies and their minds—to take what has been taught to them and make active change. This change happens both on an individual and a systemic level with church staff bringing this to other congregations, higher levels of the PC(USA)'s hierarchy, and organizations associated with the church. GCPC is actively working to subvert white supremacy culture through recognizing and deconstructing it both in the lives of the individuals and within the congregation as a whole. This does not mean they are free from perpetuating white supremacy due to it being embodied by us all and carried out through our own thoughts and behavior. Success of this subversion and perpetuation is not measurable, and to focus on that is to play into white supremacy culture's characteristic of quantity over quality; needing a thorough, step-by-step plan for a society not centered on white bodies takes away from the present work and acts as a delay. Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church continues to work together to study white supremacy and how it is ingrained in our bodies as well as how to unlearn its harmful beliefs and practices.

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