

ECC Synod Preparatory Material

October 2026

Preparatory resource to build a shared foundation for reflection, discussion, and deeper engagement at Synod

Purpose: This handout is intended to help Synod participants develop a common understanding of three interconnected themes shaping important conversations in the United States today: white supremacy, white Christian nationalism, and structural and institutional racism. These terms are related, but they are not identical. Understanding both their differences and overlap can help us engage the Synod conversation with greater clarity, honesty, and care.

1. Understanding White Supremacy

Definition: White supremacy is an ideology and social system rooted in the belief that white people are naturally superior to other racial groups and therefore entitled to greater power, privilege, and influence in society. It has operated not only through extremist movements, but also through laws, institutions, and cultural assumptions that treated whiteness as the norm and others as lesser.

Historical development: White supremacy did not begin at one single moment, nor can it be reduced to one person. It developed over centuries through conquest, colonization, slavery, segregation, and pseudoscientific ideas about race. In both Europe and the United States, white supremacist thinking became embedded in political, social, and economic systems and was often used to justify domination over nonwhite peoples.

Doctrine of Discovery and Christian empire: In the Christian colonial context, several 15th-century papal bulls, including *Dum Diversas* (1452), *Romanus Pontifex* (1455), and *Inter Caetera* (1493), were later used to justify European conquest and the seizure of lands inhabited by non-Christian peoples. These documents helped shape what became known as the 'Doctrine of Discovery,' which contributed to centuries of dispossession, subjugation, and violence against Indigenous peoples and others. In 2023, the Vatican formally stated that the 'Doctrine of Discovery' is not part of Catholic teaching and repudiated the concepts that failed to recognize the inherent human rights of Indigenous peoples.

Why it matters today: White supremacy has changed form over time. In earlier generations it was often expressed openly through slavery, segregation, lynching, and exclusionary laws. Today it can still appear in overt hate movements, but it also persists in more subtle ways through systems, narratives, and assumptions that preserve racial hierarchy while appearing neutral or normal.

2. Understanding White Christian Nationalism

Definition: White Christian nationalism is a framework that blends a particular form of Christianity with national identity, political power, and cultural dominance. In the United States, it often assumes that America is fundamentally a Christian nation and that public life should be shaped by one preferred version of Christianity. While not all Christian nationalism is explicitly white, in practice it has often overlapped with racial exclusion and nostalgia for a social order centered on white cultural control.

Core characteristics: White Christian nationalism often includes several recurring ideas: that America was founded to be a Christian nation, that the government should privilege Christianity in public life, that religious identity should shape national belonging, and that social change toward pluralism or equality represents a threat to the nation's 'true' character. It may use religious language to defend political extremism, exclusion, or resistance to democratic inclusion.

Why it matters today: This ideology has gained renewed visibility in contemporary political discourse. It is important because it can present exclusionary or authoritarian impulses in moral or religious language, making them seem righteous rather than harmful. For Christians committed to justice, humility, and human dignity, it raises serious spiritual and ethical concerns.

3. Understanding Structural and Institutional Racism

Definition: Structural racism refers to the broader pattern by which societies organize power, opportunity, and resources in ways that consistently advantage white people and disadvantage people of color. Institutional racism refers more specifically to policies, practices, and norms within and across institutions that produce unequal outcomes, whether or not individual decision-makers express explicit prejudice.

How it works: Structural and institutional racism are visible when disparities repeat across many parts of life, including education, housing, employment, health care, criminal justice, and wealth. These disparities are not just random or individual. They are often the result of accumulated decisions, longstanding policies, and inherited systems that continue to shape opportunity and harm across generations.

Why it matters today: These forms of racism help explain why racial inequality can continue even when openly racist language is publicly rejected. They remind us that racism is not only about personal attitudes; it can also be embedded in structures that feel normal because they have existed for so long.

4. How These Three Themes Relate to Each Other

- White supremacy provides the underlying logic of racial hierarchy.
- Structural and institutional racism are among the main ways that hierarchy gets built into everyday systems and outcomes.
- White Christian nationalism can provide religious language or moral cover that blesses exclusion, inequality, or domination as though they were part of a divine or national order.

They are not the same thing, but they often reinforce one another. Understanding that relationship can help Synod participants recognize why these issues are not simply political topics, but spiritual, moral, and communal concerns as well.

5. Important Historical Clarification

Earlier discussion raised questions about the origins of white supremacy and the role of the Church. It is historically fair to say that some Christian institutions and leaders helped provide theological and political justification for conquest and colonization. It is not historically accurate, however, to say that one pope 'invented racism' or is singularly responsible for all systemic racism that followed. The more accurate framing is that the Doctrine of Discovery emerged through a series of papal documents and was then amplified through European empires, colonial governments, slavery, and race-based legal systems over many centuries.

It is also important to note that Pope Francis did, in fact, ask forgiveness from Indigenous peoples for the evil committed by many Christians against them, including during his 2022 visit to Canada.

6. Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What assumptions about race, power, religion, and national identity have shaped our society in ways we may not always see?
- How do these systems affect not only public policy, but also churches, communities, and relationships?
- What does Christian discipleship require of us when religious language is used to justify exclusion, hierarchy, or harm?
- How can Synod participants engage these realities in a way that is truthful, compassionate, and rooted in justice?

Educational Resources

White Christian Nationalism

PBS News Hour: What is Christian Nationalism? (7 mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgC7YQAtGOw>

WSJ: The Man Leading Christian Nationalism's Rise Under Trump (10 mins)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zlz_0kwno0c

Britannica: Christian Nationalism <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christian-nationalism>

White Supremacy

Understanding White Supremacy & How to Defeat It (3 mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gqQzbp5wk4>

Global News: The Rise of White Supremacy and Its New Face (5 mins)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnI9c4_xu8w

TEDx: Same Dog, Same Tricks – Russell Ellis (17 mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUhbDZ4jwCQ>

Britannica: White Supremacy <https://www.britannica.com/topic/white-supremacy>

Structural and Institutional Racism

Systemic Racism Explained I (3 mins) https://youtu.be/YrHIQIO_bdQ?si=wRlO_VWHH-Sz0GnC

Systemic Racism Explained II (7 mins) https://youtu.be/lQ_8eOaiz8o?si=ix1gcTUuiUSpQ1Ty

How Structural Racism Works (23 mins)

<https://youtu.be/X3KsVRkbnn4>

Health Affairs: Systemic and Structural Racism: Definitions, Examples, Health Damages, and Approaches to Dismantling <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2021.01394>

National Academies / NCBI: The Historical and Contemporary Context for Structural, Systemic, and Institutional Racism in the United States

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK593028/>

Doctrine of Discovery / Church History

Vatican: Joint Statement on the 'Doctrine of Discovery' (March 30, 2023)

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/03/30/230330b.html>

Vatican: Pope Francis' address to Indigenous peoples in Canada (July 25, 2022)

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220725-popolazioniindigene-canada.pdf>

Canadian Museum for Human Rights: Doctrine of Discovery

<https://humanrights.ca/story/doctrine-discovery>