

An Advent Examination:  
When Bigotry Paraded Through Our Churches and Our Streets  
by Rev. Anne Cormier, Co-Chair  
Zachariah Walker Racial Justice Initiative (ZWRJI) Task Force.

As we prepare our hearts to receive Christ anew, the PSEC Zachariah Walker Racial Justice Initiative (ZWRJI) task force, named for the man who was brutally lynched on August 13, 1911 in Coatesville, Pa., is committed to expand consciousness and conversations around racial justice issues with the hope of nurturing anti-racism efforts in our congregations and communities. The ZWRJI task force invites congregations and individuals to a deeper awakening of the impact systemic racism and white supremacy have on white American Christian faith and culture.

White supremacy continues to linger in our churches and in the psyche of American Christendom. Author and researcher Robert P. Jones, in his book *White Too Long*, reveals that racism and Christianity have a positive correlation; that a white person is more likely to be racist if they are church-going Christians.

Let that sink in for a minute.

Jones writes, *“Four hundred years after the first African slave landed on our shores, and more than 150 years after the abolition of slavery, a combination of social forces and demographic changes has brought the country to a crossroads. We white Christians must find the courage to face the fact that **the version of Christianity that our ancestors built – “the faith of our fathers,” as the hymn celebrates it – was a cultural force that, by design, protected and propagated white supremacy.** We have inherited this tradition with scant critique, and we have a moral and religious obligation to face the burden of that history and its demand on our present. And we have to accept, given the way in which white supremacy has burrowed into our Christian identity, that **refusing to address this sinister disorder in our faith will continue to generate serious negative consequences not just for our fellow Americans but also for ourselves and our children.**”*<sup>1</sup> (pg. 234, emphasis mine)

I didn't have to search very long before I found disheartening and scathing evidence in support of Jones' findings about the collusion between white Christian churches and white supremacy. My limited research centered on the second wave of white supremacy in the US which unfolded during the 1920's and coincided with the beginnings of the “Great Northward Migration” of African

Americans, the European economic collapse and subsequent surge in immigration to the U.S., and the rise of white nationalism in the aftermath of World War I.

I discovered that the Ku Klux Klan published their own newspaper called *The Fiery Cross*. In the September 5, 1924 edition, an article with the headline "70,000 MINISTERS ARE KLAN MEMBERS", quoted Rev. Mr. George McDowell whose sermon title was "The Ku Klux Klan." He boasted, *"Seventy thousand Protestant ministers of the gospel are members of the Ku Klux Klan.... Ten million Protestants are in its ranks with thousands uniting in its ranks every week."* Even when we allow for some exaggeration in Rev. McDowell's reporting, most scholars state that Klan membership at its peak in the 1920's was between 4 to 5 million with the support and sympathy of millions more.

The prevalence of the Klan within white, Protestant Christianity is undeniable. A 2016 article in *The Atlantic*, stated that: *"A century ago, millions of Americans banded together in defense of white, Christian America and traditional morality—and most of their compatriots turned a blind eye to the Ku Klux Klan."* The Klan presented itself *"in part as a Christian moral reform organization and in part as a vehicle for entrenching the economic and political power of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants... who advocated the restoration of "true Americanism" and offered members a platform that demonized Blacks, Catholics, Jews, Mexicans, Asians, and any other non-white ethnic immigrants". "Ideologically,"* the article continued, *"the Klan blended xenophobia, religious prejudice, and white supremacy together with a broadly conservative moralism."*<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the Klan actively promoted its ideologies through intensive community engagement. According to *The Atlantic*, and as evidenced through many newspaper articles of the day, *"The Klan sponsored parades and picnics, baseball teams and beautiful-baby contests. Klansmen had musical troupes that performed public concerts and bands that played at state fairs. It had extensive women's auxiliaries and even a number of auxiliaries for children.".... Klan members showed up in churches on Sunday mornings to donate money and they ran charity drives. They threw Christmas parties for orphans and raised money to build Protestant-only hospitals. They made efforts to fight supposed Catholic influence in public schools by donating American flags and Bibles. They created special Klan rites for wedding ceremonies, christenings, and funerals. They ran candidates for hundreds of state and local offices, and Americans elected countless Klan members as mayors, school-board and city-council members, sheriffs, and state legislators."*<sup>3</sup>

(To read the entire article click here:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/second-klan/509468/> )

Klansmen saw no conflict between Christian faith and white supremacy. The Klansman's Creed of this era is steeped in "Christian" language such as "*I believe in God and in the tenets of the Christian religion and that a godless nation cannot long prosper. I believe that the church that is not grounded on the principles of morality and justice is a mockery to God and to man.... I hold my allegiance to the Stars and Stripes next to my allegiance to God alone.*" How many generations of Christians have been impacted by the tens of thousands of clergy who actively shaped, promoted and perpetuated a white nationalist, white supremacist disfiguring of Christianity within their congregations? How many more parents did the same within their families and communities?

To bring this even closer to home within the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference, the Rev. Jay Meier, who served as the assistant librarian for ten years with The Historical Society of Montgomery County, recently presented me with a folder representing her last collection efforts before leaving her role to attend seminary. The folder is full of newspaper clippings and articles from the 1920's documenting the activity of the KKK in Evangelical and Mainline church communities within Montgomery County and surrounding areas. In addition there were references to churches in Reading, Hamburg, Lebanon, Philadelphia and its suburbs.

What struck me at first was how casually the Klan activities of meetings, parades, recruitment events, and attendance at services of worship were advertised in local newspapers as if seemingly innocuous. A September 1922 newspaper article, attributed to the *Norristown Times Herald*, reflects a level of casual acceptance, and outright denies the harm of the white supremacy group. In a report on a cross burning in Lansdale the reporter writes "*Just now the favorite recreation in rural communities seems to be to set up a fiery cross at night. The spectacle, of course, is attributed to the Ku Klux Klan. In Lansdale the firemen were brave enough to turn out and extinguish the flames, but at other places the inhabitants were satisfied to watch the blaze at a distance. ... So long as Ku Klux Klan does not proceed further than the indulgence in fiery crosses and white-robed figures, it looks like an entirely harmless sort of amusement. And that is about as far as it will go in Pennsylvania.*" What the reporter failed to recognize in this article, was the existential threat that this terrorism and intimidation presented to Black people in these communities.

The second thing that struck me was the general presence of the Klan and the formal welcome its members enjoyed in local churches. In the many news articles of the time, several Christian denominations were noted, and specific churches named for their welcome of the Klan. Some of these churches are now part of the PSEC of the United Church of Christ. In addition, the “King Kleagle”, a regional Klan leader who managed the official affairs of regional delegations, was a prominent pastor based in Pottstown, PA.

To provide a sense of what the Klan presence in worship looked like in churches in our region, here is a compilation taken from various articles: Fifty hooded Klansmen on Sunday evening attended the services. They marched into the church, directly after the entrance of the choir, bearing the American flag and a cross while “*Onward Christian Soldiers*” was being sung. They took their seats in the place reserved for them. All listened to a patriotic sermon delivered by the pastor, who spoke of the duties of citizenship. Then members of the Klan marched down the aisle to the pulpit space. An unidentified hooded man delivered a short speech and presented the pastor with a gift of two silk flags, an American flag and a Christian flag. The Klansmen rose and sang “*The Old Rugged Cross*”, followed by the Klan quartet with their visors lowered, filing into the choir and singing “*The Bright Fiery Cross*”. All lights were dimmed, and a fiery cross was displayed during the hymn. At the conclusion of the service the leader offered a short prayer and after the benediction was pronounced, the hooded Klansmen marched out of the edifice as the congregation sang, “*Blest Be the Tie That Binds*”.

As I write this troubling history I am compelled to pray:

*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, and your people tremble before you!*

*Oh, that your Spirit would illumine this distortion of Christianity and its affront to the Gospel of Christ, that your people would see with new eyes a history we would rather deny or forget.*

*We pray that any vestiges of white supremacy and white nationalism within our congregations, communities, and Christian psyche would crumble to the ground before you!*

*Rebuild your church, O God. Free us from bigotry, fears and distortions that plague the human heart. May this generation and all of the generations to come be repairers of the breach. Make our path straight and our theology sound. And help us open our hearts to the transformative justice you desire as we await your Advent coming. Amen.*

The ZWRJI task force extends an Advent invitation to explore our assumptions about God, the church and what it means to be Christian in view of the distortions and impact white supremacy and white nationalism has had on white Christian America.

In what ways do we confuse discipleship with citizenship?

In what ways do we allow our discipleship to inform our citizenship?

Are there any idols of white nationalism and supremacy present in our church building and in our constructs of faith?

Together, with courageous and willing hearts, let us examine the subtle and not so subtle ways white nationalism and white supremacy continue to have a foothold in our churches and our world. Let us pray that Christ gives us the ability to understand this as a white problem that mars the soul of Christianity and our nation.

Let us pray that the Spirit of Christ gives us ears to hear the cries of suffering and pain and move us to be agents of anti-racism and restorative justice. In this season of watching and waiting, our Black brothers and sisters are exhausted, angry, hurting, and hoping for our voice and presence to join with theirs against the powers and principalities of systemic racism and the oppression, violence, and ongoing lynching of Black men, women, and children left in its wake.

**To view and sign the PSEC Anti-Racism Statement click here**

<https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/psecucc-antiracism-statement>

<sup>1</sup> Jones, Robert P. *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*. Simon & Schuster. NY. 2020

<sup>2</sup> Rothman, Joshua. *When Bigotry Paraded Through the Streets* . *The Atlantic*. Dec.4, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Rothman, Joshua. *When Bigotry Paraded Through the Streets* . *The Atlantic*. Dec.4, 2016.

;