

Statement on Institutional Racism and Racial Justice

Wisconsin Council of Churches Policy
November 14, 2011

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A note about this statement: Policy statements of the Wisconsin Council of Churches express the biblical, theological, and ethical grounds for the Council's work and witness regarding matters of concern to God's people in the world. They are not binding on member churches, but provide direction and guidance for the Council's education, and worship, advocacy and programming. We hope that they may also be helpful and inspiring to anyone who seeks to think and live as a Christian disciple in the public realm.

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Preamble: Definition of Institutional Racism

Institutional racism (also known as systemic racism) is measured not by personal attitudes, but by effects. By definition, institutional racism in the U.S. is the sum of policies, practices, and attitudes within an institution, government, corporation, or group that perpetuates the position of power and privilege for members of the white race. Originally these policies, practices, and attitudes were likely to be intentional. Now, however, they may not be consciously chosen. They have been a part of the status quo long enough that they have become invisible to those who benefit from them. Whites, for example, have long regarded themselves as the human norm and without a consciousness of race, whereas people of color are identified by race. That invisibility of whiteness has been a major expression and driver of white privilege and of institutional racism.¹

Institutional discrimination toward people of color was practiced, for example, by U.S. government agencies (Veterans' Administration, U.S. Employment Service, Federal Housing Administration) in the implementation of the G.I. Bill after World War II, as "African American GIs (were denied) access to their benefits and to the new educational, occupational, and residential opportunities."² Earlier, "during the New Deal Era of the 1930s and 1940s, both the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act excluded farm workers and domestics from coverage, effectively denying those disproportionately minority sectors of the work force protections and benefits routinely afforded

whites. The Federal Housing Act of 1934 brought home ownership within reach of millions of citizens by placing the credit of the federal government behind private lending to home buyers, but overtly racist categories in the Federal Housing Agency's (FHA) 'confidential' city surveys and appraisers' manuals channeled almost all of the loan money toward whites and away from communities of color."³

Government urban renewal programs disproportionately devastated minority communities, while federal highway programs subsidized the growth of segregated suburbs.⁴ In our own time, "Subsidies to the private sector by government agencies also tend to enhance the rewards of past discrimination. . . . Tax-increment financing for redevelopment programs offers tax-free and low-interest loans to developers"⁵

Today the effects of this past institutional discrimination can be seen in the enormous disparity in wealth between whites and people of color: "The median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households."⁶ A primary reason for this is that "most white families have acquired their net worth from the appreciation of property that they secured under conditions of special privilege in a discriminatory housing market."⁷

Despite examples of progress, institutional racism is manifested in people's lives as people of color experience higher rates of incarceration, poorer overall health, lower educational achievement, less wealth, greater limitations in housing, and fewer economic opportunities.

Purpose of statement

The Wisconsin Council of Churches recognizes and acknowledges its role in the perpetuation of institutional racism. In this statement we call ourselves to greater awareness of the history and continuation of racism in all institutions in our society, including our member churches. We recognize the long-standing role of Christian churches in the U.S. in standing alongside the state in supporting policies and practices that have provided benefits and privileges for white people at the expense and to the detriment of people of color. As we seek greater racial justice, we call ourselves to deeper consciousness of the ways in which we participate in institutional racism. We hold

ourselves responsible for informed action in which maintain a critical stance in relationship to the state and advocate for policies and laws that intentionally work on behalf of all people.

Background for statement

Institutional racism stands within a long history of structural and systemic inequality within the U.S. that began even well before the founding of this country. From the early days of “discovery” of this land, to the exploitation of the indigenous people [Native Americans], to the trade and enslavement of Africans, majority white Christian churches gave support to the social system and provided biblical rationale for their positions and behavior which included practices of separation and discrimination. Most, but not all, Protestant majority white mainline denominations participated in the missionary schools that sought to take language and culture from America’s indigenous peoples, and perpetuated a consciousness of “manifest destiny” that provided justification for people of European heritage to see it as their right and privilege to take the lands of people of indigenous heritage and former Mexican citizens.

Institutional racism resulted in the separation of people by race within most Protestant church bodies. Leaders within Protestant churches played visible roles within the state. “Up until the latter part of the 20th century, Christians (Protestants in particular) were the ‘spoon’ stirring the melting pot: controlling immigration, education, and government; defining the moral vision and ethos of America.”⁸

White superiority and privilege at the level of institutions has also played out at the community and interpersonal levels as people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds have been separated into different worshipping communities. The dominant cultural values and practices of white people have been the invisible and often unconscious standard for thought and action, leaving unexamined the policies and practices of white institutions, including churches.

Because of our role as a part of the institutional church, we take responsibility for our own education in understanding structural and systemic inequities of race, culture, and class. As we grow in understanding, we seek to build partnerships that are based in mutuality and respect. We are encouraged by the formal ecumenical agreements

that have been made between denominations that are predominantly white and those with greater racial diversity or that were chartered by people of color. These agreements present new opportunities for confronting institutional racism in our congregations. As a faith community committed to social action, we ground our advocacy in a theology that stands against injustice and that seeks equality for all of God’s people. We stand within the history of the civil rights movement with its foundation in the Black church experience and theology.

Theological foundation of statement

Jesus’ ministry and his call for liberation that is found in the launching of his ministry in Luke 4:18 call us to the work of liberation.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lords’ favor.”

The New Testament calls us to look beyond differences in background to see our connections and oneness in Christ.

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Because of our deep connection as one body in Christ, we are called to stand alongside one another and to share in the lived experience of one another.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . . If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. . . . But God has so arranged the body . . . that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored,

all rejoice together with it.” (I Corinthians 12:12-14, 19-20, 24b-26)

Repeatedly throughout the Old Testament, we are called to live in ways of justice and peace. Micah and Amos present God’s requirements:

“And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” (Amos 5:24).

The life and words of Jesus in the New Testament challenge us to see our places of privilege and to walk in new ways. Jesus challenged the attitudes of ethnic separation of his time as he healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman, shared time with the Samaritan woman at the well, told a story of a Samaritan being neighbor, and ate with those who were considered outcasts by society. He chided church leaders of his day who put institutional laws and practices above the needs of people, even as he stepped outside institutional policy and practice to heal on the Sabbath.

This statement on institutional racism and racial justice is grounded in God’s admonition to see all people as equal, created in God’s image, with a diversity of gifts to share. It is founded on the biblical call to do justice. It is based in the model of Jesus who challenged attitudes of prejudice and the institutional practices of discrimination of his day.

Call to Action

As a council of Christian churches, we hold ourselves accountable for our own critical self-reflection on the ways in which we knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate institutional racism. We call ourselves to greater awareness of issues of power and privilege. We will strengthen our advocacy efforts as we challenge policies and laws of the state that perpetuate structural injustice.

We, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, commit to combat institutional racism as we:

- **Foster dialogue** and educational events to deepen understanding of racism at the individual, cultural, and institutional levels, including the church;
- **Grow in partnership** with historical Black churches, immigrant churches, and those of other faith backgrounds to strengthen common efforts with an engaged shared leadership;
- **Develop understanding** and resources that make clear the link between racism and poverty;
- **Call to awareness** the hidden racism in laws and policies of the state;
- **Call for public policy** and legislation that work to reduce racial disparities in all aspects of institutional life, including housing, insurance coverage, employment, transportation, education, health care, sentencing and incarceration, banking and loans, representation and voting;
- **Promote efforts** to implement fair and just policies on immigration;
- **Address policies** that affect Native American sovereignty and that provide access to services and opportunities for Native Americans on reservations;
- **Expose and work against policies** that profile people of color or of a particular faith;
- **Hold ourselves accountable** as a body to do our part in fulfilling the aims of this statement, reporting each year to the annual meeting.

Notes

1. Richard Dyer, “The Matter of Whiteness,” in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2002), 10-11.

2. Karen Brodtkin, “How Jews Became White Folks,” in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2002), 43.

3. George Lipsitz, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness,” in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed.

Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2002), 64.

4. Ibid., 65.

5. Ibid., 74.

6. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, "The Wealth Gap Widens," August 14, 2011, sec. J.

7. Lipsitz, "Possessive Investment," 71.

8. Mark Griffin and Theron Walker, *Living on the Borders: What the Church Can Learn from Ethnic Immigrant Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004), 18