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RESPONSE TO MARK WILHELM:

DEI, Great; DWS (Dismantling White Supremacy), Even Better

The purpose of higher education at Lutheran colleges and universities is to contribute to the flourishing of all. DEI is great, but if Lutheran colleges and universities want to up their game, DWS (dismantling white supremacy) is even better. Dismantling white supremacy is essential to the flourishing of all. Thus, it should be a core practice of our higher education.

The protests and rebellion around the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others have helped the wider/whiter public in the United States understand both the importance and urgency of dismantling white supremacy. Around the same time, Trump-appointed, Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin McAleenan confirmed white supremacy to be our greatest domestic threat.

Given how hot this summer has been, we could also make connections between white supremacy on the one hand, and climate disruption and environmental degradation on the other, like James Cone does.

“The logic that led to slavery and segregation in the Americas, colonization and apartheid in Africa, and the role of white supremacy throughout the world is the same one that leads to the exploitation of animals and the ravaging of nature. It is a mechanistic and

instrumental logic that defines everything and everybody in terms of their contribution to the development and defense of white world supremacy.”

What is white supremacy, and what is a key harm to BIPOC communities? According to Frances Ansley,



“White supremacy is a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.”

If any part of the above quote describes business as usual at our colleges and universities, it’s time for a long, hard look at ourselves in light of our commitment to the flourishing of all.

There are some Lutheran sensibilities that can help us make dismantling white supremacy a core practice of higher education. I’ll just mention three.

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1) To Lutherans, self-righteousness is totally sus. Lutheran understandings of human beings as created and loved by God, and of infinite worth, make them skeptical about self-justification, attempts to earn and prove your worth. We're thus free to see our beauty and our flaws.

My own higher education has often felt like a seemingly endless valorization, endorsement, and aggrandizement of the West and whiteness. Whether it's been about the Enlightenment/Enwhitenment, science and technology, industry and development, or equality and democracy, the sense of white superiority has been at once tedious and terrible. But if classic scary movies have taught us anything, it's that what you disavow comes back to haunt you. We're being haunted by the legacies of genocide, slavery, and colonialism today. It's time to interrogate this past, undo its impacts in the present, and work for a better future.

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2) To Lutherans, the death of Jesus was a decolonial shockwave, still reverberating across space and time. We're all living in a state of thrownness because of it. It turns out that the eye-averting execution of this thirty-something, Palestinian-Jewish construction worker—condemned for blasphemy by his religious community and viewed as a threat to society by the political regime—inspires our solidarity with marginalized peoples, those subordinated by white supremacy. It also turns out that this particular death generates momentum in decolonizing higher education. It's time to rewrite general education based on a more diverse and inclusive range of sources.

3) Finally, Lutheran colleges and universities are supposed to deliver higher education that lays a foundation for critical thinking that can still register awe. Dismantling white supremacy means more awe, and thus more wonder and joy, based on a much richer, broader cross-section of human experience. It also contributes to intellectual curiosity and humility.

How can Lutheran colleges and universities make a stronger commitment to DEI? By making the dismantling of white supremacy a core practice of higher education.