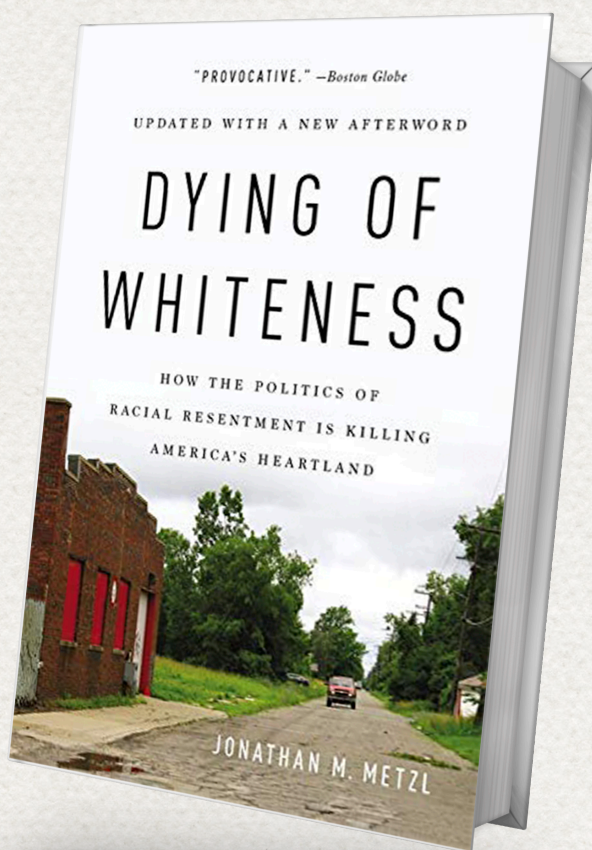


# GCORR Book Study Guide

## *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland*

By Jonathan M. Metzl

FOR SMALL GROUP & INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION



**RELIGION & RACE**

The United Methodist Church

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This study guide is divided into four sessions, which follow the organization of the book:

1. Introduction & Part 1: Missouri
2. Part 2: Tennessee
3. Part 3: Kansas
4. A Faith Challenge in Dying of Whiteness

Sessions may be completed each week for a 4-week study.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Author and physician Jonathan Metzl based the findings in his book on a six-year research project he conducted across the southern and midwestern United States. Between 2013 and 2018, Metzl met and talked with people from different racial/ethnic groups, economic realities, and social locations, asking them about their own lives to weigh in on the “hot-button” political topics—namely health care, guns, taxation, public education, and the appropriate role of government—which comprise cornerstones of the contemporary white, conservative agenda.

What Metzl found—and the central theme of this book—is evidence that white Americans, particularly low- and middle-

income white people—often vote against and eschew governmental laws and programs that could improve their lives and livelihoods if they believe that “undeserving” immigrants, unhoused persons, BIPOC people, and some women will also benefit.

Metzl explores the political rhetoric and dogma rooted in historic and systemic racism, white American identity, fear, and disdain for “the other,” and anti-immigrant sentiments that inform these attitudes in white people. He suggests that many white Americans are literally “dying of whiteness,” making political, social, and moral “tradeoffs that negatively affect their lives and livelihoods in support of larger prejudices and ideals” (Metzl, p. 5).

Metzl further asserts, “The white body that refuses [medical] treatment rather than supporting a system that might benefit everyone then becomes a metaphor for, and parable of, the threatened decline of the largest nation” (Metzl, p. 6). He goes on to say that as white resentments have become codified into laws, the death rates of all Americans—including white people—increase (p. 8).

According to Metzl, “A host of complex anxieties prompt increasing numbers of white Americans...to support right-wing politicians and policies, even when these policies actually harm white Americans at growing rates” (pp. 9-10).

## KEY THEMES

- Wealthy, politically conservative politicians often play to the biases and racially based fears of poor and working-class white people to inspire them to vote against public education, affordable healthcare, gun control, and other policies in the name of keeping “undeserving” BIPOC people, immigrants, and “others” from gaining an “unfair” advantage.
- In Missouri, gun-related suicides among white men increased when gun control laws became less restrictive.

## KEY TERMS

- **White racial resentment (pp. 7-10)** - A political phenomenon attributed to such players as the modern-day Tea Party, Oath Keepers, and Donald Trump, which asserts that certain laws and government safety-net programs are designed to threaten the social hierarchy that keeps, “white Americans hovering above Mexicans, welfare queens, and nonwhite others,” and that such laws and programs heap lavish funds and benefits to immigrants, BIPOC people, and scammers, while hardworking “real Americans” (read: white people) pay the bills.
- **Systemic racism** - Racial biases, discrimination, principles, assumptions, policies (written or implied), practices,

and beliefs that favor white people over Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and support unfair and inequitable treatment of BIPOC. (See definition with examples at [www.r2hub.org/library/what-is-systemic-racism](http://www.r2hub.org/library/what-is-systemic-racism).)

- **Race** - “Race is a social and political construct that creates and assigns people to different hierarchal racial groups and assigned racialized social identities,” according to Anti-Bias Education for Young Children & Ourselves (Derman-Sparks, Edwards, and Goins, 2020). Scientific and Christological consensus agree that the concept of race has no biological basis and that all humans are of one biological race. The minor physical differences among people have led to today’s racial categories of people of African, Asian, European, Indigenous/Native, Latin American, and Pacific Island/Native Hawaiian heritage. Historically, however, the social and political idea of race—exacerbated by white Christianity and the notion of manifest destiny—became the center of systemic racism, which has justified European nations and the United States in killing, enslaving, exploiting, colonizing, and stealing land and resources from nonwhite people across the globe. This false concept of “superior” and “inferior” races continues today. (More information available at [www.r2hub.org/library/what-is-race](http://www.r2hub.org/library/what-is-race).)

## OPENING PRAYER

Loving, prodding God of us all, we embark on a journey of discovery. We are diving into a book that may inspire, provoke, challenge, and inform us. And we are grateful that you have given us minds and hearts capable of expanding so that we learn more each day about how to better walk in your ways and with all your people. Help us to hear your voice through what we read, what we learn, and what we share during this study. The goal, dear God, is to walk with you and live more faithfully as your kin-dom people, through Christ, the Savior of the whole, wide world. Amen.

## FIRST THOUGHTS FROM THE BOOK

"From before the birth of the nation, American laws, mores, and traditions coded armed white men as defenders and armed black men as threats. Not just the bodies were racialized; so were the guns as well. Historical constructions also provide themes used and manipulated by staunchly pro-gun politicians, lobbying groups, manufacturers, and advertisers in their attempts to allow the selling of ever-more guns, primarily to white people." (Metzl, pp. 71-72)

"Put another way, the data hints [sic] at the possibility that white male gun suicide may be a side effect of both loose gun policies and conceptions of white masculinity, in addition to the effects of troubled individual minds. And in this sense, white men writ large make a Faustian bargain in order to accept the larger benefits of gun ownership more broadly." (Metzl p. 110)

## SCRIPTURE FOR REFLECTIONS

"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride." (Galatians 6:2-4, NSRV)

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION (30 MINUTES)

1. What does Metzl say are some of the primary drivers of gun ownership by white people from the colonial days until after the Civil War? How did racial injustice and attitudes about Native and African Americans inform white people's attitudes about gun ownership?

2. Recall the interview with Connor's father, beginning on p. 55, through "The Man Card" (p. 78). What were some of the specific warning signs that Connor might be suicidal? How did those warning signs reflect the state of his mental health, his self-esteem, and his relationships with guns?
3. Reflect on the Scripture. What are some ways that Connor's social location (including racial and gender identity) may have affected his judgment before his suicide? What might have changed if Connor's "burdens" had been noticed and born by his community? Fellow gun owners in his inner circle? His church?
4. What concerns does Metzl raise about the need for responsible gun ownership and its impact on addressing white supremacy/white anger? In addressing justice and reconciliation among white Americans and Americans who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color?

## WRAP-UP (10 MINUTES)

Invite each participant to (or journal or make a social media post, if you are studying alone) name one NEW thought about racial justice that this discussion inspired. After each person speaks, invite the whole group to say, "God, increase our knowledge and expand our willingness to hear."

**OPENING PRAYER**

Loving God, the very air we breathe is created by you as a gift for every living thing. Forgive us, and thank you for understanding that we sometimes take it for granted. So, as we gather to discuss stories of access to health care—and who has or does not have it—give us eyes to see and ears to hear the voices of those who are angry, lost, afraid, protected, unprotected, conflicted, and hope-filled. Remind us that we all breathe the same air and are called to be life-givers in you. Because all people are your people, and even when we are uninformed or unjust or pushed aside, YOU call us to be repairers and restorers as we work to be more like Jesus for the sake of your work and your will. Thank you, God. Amen.

**FIRST THOUGHTS FROM THE BOOK**

“Even on death’s doorstep, Trevor wasn’t angry [about lack of affordable healthcare]. In fact, he staunchly supported the stance promoted by his elected officials. ‘Ain’t no way I would ever support Obamacare or sign up for it,’ he told me. ‘I would rather die.’ When I asked him why he felt this way even as he faced severe illness, he explained, ‘We don’t need any more government in our lives. And in any case, no way I want my tax dollars paying for Mexicans and welfare queens.’” (Metzl, p. 3)

“Here were [white] men who depended on assistance for stents, antibiotics, operations, or oxygen tanks decrying the very networks that potentially provided lifesaving help. Their expressions of whiteness and white anxiety seemed in so many ways to work against their own self-interests; to live free and die sooner.” (Metzl, pp. 152-153)

**SCRIPTURE FOR REFLECTIONS**

“Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” (Hebrews 13:16, NRSV)

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION (30 MINUTES)**

1. Reflect on Metzl’s description of Trevor’s attitudes about affordable health care and his willingness to forgo it for himself to keep “Mexicans and welfare queens” from accessing it. What does Metzl say about the correlation between racial prejudice and this attitude? Explain how Trevor’s beliefs do—or do not—serve him best.
2. Reflect on Metzl’s conversations with low-income white men and high-income white men in Part Two. What were some of the groups’ shared beliefs about government-assisted health care, such as the Affordable Care Act? How did their statements about race inform their beliefs?

3. Consider the Scripture for today. How does it inform your beliefs about government-supported health care for people who cannot afford it?
4. Name one way your attitudes about other racial groups inform your opinions about health care for all in the United States. Describe how your faith and attitudes about race conflict with and/or complement each other.

### WRAP-UP (10 MINUTES)

Ask each participant to share in 30 seconds (or write in your journal or post on social media, if you are studying on your own) one idea, word, or phrase from this session's reading assignments that was difficult for them to understand or to reconcile. After each person speaks, the facilitator or the group may say, "Thank you for your honesty. Keep pushing."

### CLOSING PRAYER

*\*Invite the group to repeat each line after the leader.*

God blesses the poor, the cast-aside ones.

Just as God blesses the wealthy, the sheltered, and the in-crowds.

And so, all we who follow Emmanuel, God-with-us,

Ask that God shows us the way to bless each other,

Beyond politics, beyond barriers of racism,

Just because that is what God's people do.

Amen.

**OPENING PRAYER**

“O Wisdom on High, by you the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises for the godly. Grant us, in all doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us do, that we may be saved from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.” (The United Methodist Book of Worship, No. 525, adapted)

**FIRST THOUGHTS FROM THE BOOK**

“If you lived on the Missouri side, you grew tired of watching your friends move to Kansas around the time that they had reached junior high. Everyone knew the reputation of Kansas public schools: excellent teachers, small class sizes, advanced curricula, and strong track records placing students in colleges. For these reasons, many parents felt a move to Kansas was worth the extra property taxes, which they viewed as an investment in their children. ...Kansas became a frequent landing place for white flight.” (Metzl, p. 194-195)

“[Between 2010 and 2014], policies that redistributed wealth and resources away from minority populations had tremendously negative effects for white populations as well. ...For instance, stagnant white graduation rates had shown steady improvements until 2012, when the rates began to flatten out and fall 5-8 percent below projections.” (Metzl, pp. 254-255)

**SCRIPTURE FOR REFLECTIONS**

“Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’” (Isaiah 30:20-21, NRSV)

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION  
(30 MINUTES)**

1. Consider Metzl's description of the Kansas public school systems in their heyday. What was the racial climate then? Segregated? “Separate but equal?” “Fair for all?”



2. What did white families like Metzl's believe about the value of education for their children and their willingness to support taxes and other government initiatives to undergird public education? How do those ideals compare/contrast your beliefs about public education today?
3. Review the story told by the school administrator on p. 229. What conflicts was she experiencing about her longtime political beliefs and her own experiences with "austerity policies" and public education?
4. Consider the Scripture. Whether you turn to the right, the left, or somewhere in between, name one aspect of your Christian faith that would encourage your support of equitable education opportunities for all American children. How does/would that support affect you personally? Your community?

### WRAP-UP (15 MINUTES)

Invite participants to (or journal or make a social media post) to complete these two sentences:

"I am learning that systemic racism in America affects Black, Indigenous, and People of Color by \_\_\_\_\_. The by-product of it for some poor white people is \_\_\_\_\_."

### CLOSING PRAYER

*After each person has spoken, end the time by saying together (or the leader may say):*

"Open our eyes, God of Restoration, Justice, and Love, that we may see. Open our ears, that we may hear. Open our hands, that we may BE the changes needed in your world." Amen.

**OPENING PRAYER**

Let the worlds of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer, our Savior and our Friend, our political and social conscience, and the center of our joy. Amen.

**FIRST THOUGHTS FROM THE BOOK**

"A country like the United States works best by leap of faith. The nation thrives when the majority of the populace buys into the notion that people of different backgrounds, with different viewpoints, and living in different places can find enough common ground to invest in the common good. ...Quality of life benefits from trust and cooperation across social boundaries, and that quality of life itself can be a source of patriotic pride." (Metzl, p.285)

"...[A] narrower American identity builds walls, erects castle doctrines, and stands its ground. It blocks social programs out of concerns that minorities and immigrants use more than their fair share of resources. ...This version of America spends its time, resources, and intellectual energy circling the wagons." (Metzl, pp. 284-285)

**SCRIPTURE FOR REFLECTIONS**

"'For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.' She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah." (1 Kings 17:14-16, NRSV)

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION  
(30 MINUTES)**

1. What is Metzl's assertion about how systemic racism against BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) often fans the flames of white American racial fears and resentments? Describe one new idea you learned in *Dying of Whiteness*.
2. Consider the Biblical story of Zarephath, the widow, and Elijah in 1 Kings and the widow's initial reaction to Zarephath's request for food and drink. How does fear of scarcity inform her first response?
3. Now, describe Metzl's description of how fear of scarcity and the "wrong people" getting government assistance

may affect poor and working-poor white Americans.

4. Offer a one-sentence Biblical message you, as a Christian, might offer to white Americans who react out of fear and racial bias. How comfortable would you be in making this witness in public? With an individual?

### WRAP-UP (10 MINUTES)

Invite each participant (or post on social media for yourself) to share one idea from *Dying of Whiteness* that has affected their understanding of Christian discipleship.

### CLOSING PRAYER

Search us, know us, teach us, and perfect us, O God. We want to be instruments of truth-telling, of healing from racial injustice and strife, and of bringing Your holy, flourishing kin-dom on Earth. Thank you for the challenges and the lessons of this book, *Dying of Whiteness*, and give each of us the courage and wisdom to use what we have learned to make our Christian witness more authentic and our calls to ministry more transforming. In Jesus' name, we ask. Amen.



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