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The Arkansas Conference Staff Shares What They've Learned From Caste: The Origins of our Discontents

Staff book study furthers the discussion on racism and caste systems in the United States

Jun 23, 2021 | Arkansas United Methodist



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In 2020, the staff of the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church underwent a study on implicit bias. Led by the Rev. Rashim Merriwether Sr. Special Assistant to the Bishop for Ethnic Concerns and Initiatives, and the Rev. Jim Polk, Assistant to the Bishop

and Director of Connectional Ministry, our months-long study led us into vital conversations with each other about implicit bias, prejudice, racism, and more issues on social justice.

Desiring to further explore issues of racism and caste in the United States after our study ended, the Arkansas Conference staff began a new book discussion series exploring author Isabel Wilkerson's New York Times best-selling novel *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*.

Wilkerson's *Caste* not only explores the systemic and systematic racism ingrained in the history of the United States but goes further by comparing the caste system of India with our own version of a caste system that has existed right here in America for hundreds of years.

Below are a few responses from Arkansas Conference staff members who share what they have learned from our ongoing discussion on caste, racism, and systemic oppression in the United States.



“The book *Caste* deepened my understanding of the complex infrastructure that was created in the United States to suppress anyone that is not white. Although we didn't create this system, we inherited it and it is our responsibility to recognize it, help others recognize it, and actively work to dismantle it.”

– Megan Rugg, Assistant Director of the Center for Administrative Services



“The book Caste filled in so many historical holes that I had in my knowledge of our country and the role of our state in the suppression of people of color. I especially loved taking part in this book discussion as a staff and hearing the powerful explanations and experiences shared by my black co-workers. Hearing their voices touched me so deeply and taught me that I have more work to do educating myself and others.”

– Melinda Shunk, Children’s Ministry Coordinator



“Caste helped me to understand the unique development of racism in the United States. Through written (and unwritten, but understood) laws and regulations, racism is a part of every aspect of American culture from medicine and education to the economy and the church. When we talk about dismantling racism, it is not only about dismantling racism in our hearts, but also dismantling racism in the systems that were built and perpetuate racial disparity.”

– Rev. Samantha Meadors, Project Coordinator for The Delta Project



“Caste has opened my eyes to countless ways that our country has been set up to actively work against black people while also creating systems to ensure that white people were not taught to recognize these racist policies. And, I’m learning that open, honest conversations are important, although uncomfortable at times.”

– Michelle Moore, Youth and Young Adult Coordinator; Developer of Clergy Recruitment



“Caste shows us that having real conversations on racism and the ways that it has manifested in this country is not only a difficult conversation, but pulls at many of our inherited beliefs as a society. As we navigate each chapter, ideologies, traditions, and biases are challenged and re-examined. This leaves individuals on both sides of the conversation over race feeling vulnerable while defining a new personal narrative about self and what responsibility or role we have as part of humanity and the Christian Faith to address the sin

of racism. Caste peels back the layers of a complicated past and a hidden present. Caste does not focus on the blame game, but paints the picture for all to see an honest look at the cause, duality, and the collateral damage racism has and can cause in the story of humanity if we don't have the conversation. Caste reveals the sin of racism and promotes a space for everyone to learn, grieve, repent, affirm, transform, and grow."

– Rev. Rashim Merriwether Sr., Special Assistant to the Bishop for
Ethnic Concerns and Initiatives



Learning about the caste system in the U.S. was eye-opening. I was somewhat familiar with India's history of the caste, but reading this book made me more aware of how prevalent it is today. We see those on the highest rungs of the caste system — people with power, money, those in government — frequently pit the middle class against the subordinate poor caste to deflect attention away from what the wealthiest or most powerful may be doing. A recent example of how the caste system works is demonizing those on unemployment as lazy and taking away benefits. Never taking into

account facts of life such as low wages; availability of full-time jobs with benefits rather than lower-paying part-time positions without benefits; the lack of available and affordable childcare and eldercare; affordable housing; and reliable transportation. These are real issues that we face in our country.

I was also sickened to read Hitler's observation of the American South. He was impressed and marveled at our knack for maintaining an air of innocence about the torture and death of our slaves. One way to do that was to change the conversation. It was easier to think of slaves as currency, machines, and property rather than human beings.

– Mona Williams, Benefits Officer

For more resources on the Arkansas Conference's Dismantling Racism Initiative, visit arumc.org/dismantling-racism-initiative/

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