

2021 Kansas Legislative Event for Advocacy in Faith
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***White Fragility* and other readings about Systemic Racism**
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George Floyd, a black man, was killed on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis. During his arrest for allegedly using a counterfeit bill, a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, held Floyd to the ground with his knee to Floyd’s neck. Floyd told the officer he could not breathe. Nine and a half minutes later, Floyd had expired.

Floyd’s death brought attention, again, to the racism that permeates our society.

Sergio Pecanha, writing for The Washington Post, documents that “The United States is a vastly different country, depending on the color of your skin.”¹ Unemployment, poverty, infant mortality, incarceration rates are significantly higher for people who are African American. Education levels, family wealth, annual income, and the rate of home ownership are lower.

We (Jack and Marilyn) were asked to review Robin DiAngelo’s book, *White Fragility*, for LEAF. It is our feeling that it would be better for you to hear DiAngelo speak than to hear us talk about her book. What follows is information about how to access a lecture by DiAngelo; recommendations of two other authors who address racism; links to an interview with each of them; and questions for your consideration. You will engage the material more deeply and think about the issues more clearly if you make the effort to write a response to the questions.

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Robin DiAngelo wrote *White Fragility: Why it’s so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* in 2018.² A consultant for organizations wanting to provide diversity training for their members and employees, DiAngelo has witnessed the many ways white people resist acknowledging their participation in and benefit from systemic racism. DiAngelo is a white woman writing for white people.

DiAngelo introduces the book with these words: “White people in North America live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race, and white people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality. As a result, we are insulated from racial stress, at the same time that we come to feel entitled to and deserving of our advantage.” And a few lines later: “The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable –the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation. These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial

¹ Sergio Pecanha, “These numbers show that black and white people live in two different Americas,” The Washington Post, June 23, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/22/what-numbers-say-whites-blacks-live-two-different-americas/?arc404=true>. (Accessed January 23, 2021.)

² Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2018).

comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as *white fragility*.”³

The challenges of conversation about race are many. As white people, we do not see our race. We speak of ‘race’ only when referring to those who are not white. We define racism “as intentional acts of racial discrimination committed by immoral individuals.”⁴ We see ourselves as moral people and would not intentionally discriminate against another because of the color of their skin. Therefore, we do not, will not, see the ways we participate in societal racism.

In Chapter 2, “Racism and White Supremacy,” DiAngelo describes the social construction of race as a way to resolve the discrepancy between “all are created equal” and “the enslavement of African people...” Chapter 3, “Racism after the Civil Rights Movement,” addresses the ways that racism has persisted even as we claim to have addressed racism.

DiAngelo describes, in Chapter 4, “how being white shapes our perspectives, experiences, and responses.”⁵ As white people, we belong to the majority culture; that is, we belong! We see ourselves as “just people.” Being white is the norm. Being anything but white is outside the norm. DiAngelo defines white solidarity as “the unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort by confronting them when they say or do something racially problematic.”⁶ We (white people) work hard to maintain such solidarity.

In concluding her book, DiAngelo describes the emotions of white people when our assumptions and behaviors are challenged: We feel attacked, shamed, silenced, guilty, insulted, angry, and scared; and we respond by crying or leaving the conversation (physically or emotionally) or arguing or denying the reality of what another might be seeing in us.⁷ In the final chapter, DiAngelo suggests that we could respond differently. “...when we are given feedback on our inevitable but unaware racist patterns, we might have different feelings (gratitude, excitement, discomfort, guilt, motivation, humility, compassion, interest) and engage in different behaviors (reflection, apology, listening, processing, seeking more understanding, engaging, believing).”⁸

Listen to Robin DiAngelo speak at “**Deconstructing White Privilege with Dr. Robin DiAngelo**,” a youtube video provided by the General Commission on Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7mzj0cVL0Q&t=911s>.

Respond to the following questions.

1. What is the difference between individual prejudice and a system of inequality?
2. What are some of the predictable responses of white people in conversations about race? Have you ever said (or thought) any of these things?
3. What are the pillars of white supremacy (systemic racism)?

³ Ibid, 1-2.

⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁵ Ibid, 51.

⁶ Ibid, 57.

⁷ Ibid, 119.

⁸ Ibid, 141.

4. What is lost when we live in segregated communities?
5. Describe the good/bad binary and how it keeps racism in place.
6. What new insights did you gain from hearing DiAngelo speak?

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Ibram X. Kendi, author of *How to Be an Antiracist*,⁹ is the founding director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center and professor of history at American University and a columnist at *The Atlantic*. His book, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, won the National Book Award for Nonfiction. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi tells his own story of coming to understand racism and antiracism along with the history of racism in America.

You can hear an interview of Ibram X. Kendi (with Jemele Hill of *The Atlantic*), “**How to Be an Antiracist**,” presented by The Aspen Institute, and found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzuOlyyQlug>. The interview is 34 minutes long, with 20 minutes of questions following.

Consider the following:

1. What is the difference between being ‘not racist’ and ‘antiracist?’
2. Kendi talks about how both segregationist ideas and assimilationist ideas are racist. Explain.
3. Write a prayer of confession for your congregation that addresses our racism.
4. How will you be an antiracist?

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Isabel Wilkerson, author of *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*,¹⁰ won the Pulitzer Prize for her first book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. She has taught at Princeton, Emory and Boston universities. Wilkerson explores, by telling the stories of real people, how the United States, both in its history and today, has been shaped by a hidden caste system, “a rigid hierarchy of human rankings.”

Isabel Wilkerson is interviewed by Errol Barnett (CBS correspondent) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1whXUDDfUk>. The interview is 31 minutes long.

Consider the following:

1. How do you define ‘caste.’
2. What evidence, in current events, do you see of a caste system in the United States of America?
3. What would a world without caste look like?
4. What scripture passages might you use to describe a world without caste?

⁹ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York, One World, 2019).

¹⁰ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York, Random House, 2020).