

Social Justice and Equity book group – books read

Updated December 2025

The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story by Nicole Hannah Jones

- We thought it was important to read this book as it is often cited both by those who believe in its importance as well as those who are very critical of it. In late August 1619, a ship arrived in the British colony of Virginia bearing a cargo of twenty to thirty enslaved people from Africa. Their arrival led to the barbaric and unprecedented system of American chattel slavery that would last for the next 250 years. This book substantially expands on that work, weaving together eighteen essays that explore the legacy of slavery in present-day America with thirty-six poems and works of fiction that illuminate key moments of oppression, struggle, and resistance. This book speaks directly to our current moment, how the legacy of slavery did not end with emancipation, but continues to shape contemporary American life.

And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle by Jon Meacham

- A portrait of a very human Lincoln—an imperfect man whose moral antislavery commitment, essential to the story of justice in America, began as he grew up in an antislavery Baptist community; who insisted that slavery was a moral evil; and who sought, as he put it, to do right as God gave him to see the right.

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

- A moving account of how a young man felt about growing up Black in America, written in the form of a letter to his young son.

Caste by Isabel Wilkerson

- May have been the most influential book we read. It challenged us to think about how our entire social structure is an unrecognized caste system.

The Color of Lightning by Paulette Jiles

- In 1863, as the War Between the States creeps inevitably toward its bloody conclusion, former Kentucky slave Britt Johnson ventures west into unknown territory with his wife, Mary, and their three children, searching for a life and a future. But their dreams are abruptly shattered by a brutal Indian raid upon the Johnsons' settlement while Britt is away establishing a business. Returning to find his friends and neighbors slain or captured, his eldest son dead, his beloved and severely damaged Mary enslaved, and his remaining children absorbed into an alien society that will never relinquish its hold on them, the heartsick freedman vows not to rest until his family is whole again.

The Colored Car by Jean Alicia Elster

- This young adult book is a rich description of a family in Depression-era Detroit. In the hot summer of 1937, twelve-year-old Patsy takes care of her three younger sisters and helps her mother put up fresh fruits and vegetables in the family's summer kitchen, adjacent to the wood yard that her father owns. Patsy's mother, May Ford, helps neighborhood families by sharing the food that she preserves. When May becomes worried about how her own mother may have survived a flood, she decides to take her daughters for a visit to their grandmother's home in Clarksville, Tennessee. The girls are then exposed to racist policies governing travel. The family is led from the first-class seats they had purchased and were placed in the dirty, cramped "colored car," The book helps you watch as Patsy works to learn how to understand her experience in the colored car and also deal with the more subtle injustices that her family faces in Detroit.

***The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin**

- *The Fire Next Time* is a 1963 non-fiction book containing two essays: "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" and "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region of My Mind". The book had a reaction nationwide, contributing to the emerging civil rights movement in the 1960s. The book exhorted Americans, both black and white, to attack the legacy of racism.

***The Girl in the Photograph: The True Story of a Native America Child, Lost and Found in America* by Sen. Byron Dorgan, a member of Redeemer**

- On a winter morning in 1990, U.S. Senator Byron Dorgan of North Dakota picked up the *Bismarck Tribune*. On the front page, a small Native American girl gazed into the distance, shedding a tear. The headline: "Foster home children beaten—and nobody's helping." Dorgan, who had been working with American Indian tribes to secure resources, was upset. He flew to the Standing Rock Indian Reservation to meet with five-year-old Tamara who had suffered a horrible beating at a foster home. He visited with Tamara and her grandfather and they became friends. Then Tamara disappeared. And he would search for her for decades until they finally found each other again. This book is her story, from childhood to the present, but it's also the story of a people and a nation. More than one in three American Indian/Alaskan Native children live in poverty. AI/AN children are disproportionately in foster care and awaiting adoption. Suicide among AI/AN youth ages 15 to 24 is 2.5 times the national rate. How has America allowed this to happen? As distressing a situation as it is, this is also a story of hope and resilience. Dorgan, who founded the Center for Native American Youth (CNAV) at the Aspen Institute, has worked tirelessly to bring Native youth voices to the forefront of policy discussions, engage Native youth in leadership and advocacy, and secure and share resources for Native youth. You will fall in love with this heartbreaking story but end the book knowing what can be done and what you can do.

***The Guest Book* by Sarah Blake**

- The story explores three generations of the Milton family as they respond to changes in society and tragedies to the family beginning before WWII. It addresses issues of those who have wealth and who don't, who is included as acceptable in society and who isn't. The main setting is the summer retreat on their own exclusive island off of the coast of Maine. We had spirited discussions in the group as what it means to preserve heritage even as we acknowledge mistakes and tragedies of our ancestors. How much we decide to let our past define us as we design our future.

***The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store* by James McBride**

- The story is set in 1972 with flashback after a skeleton is found in an old well in a Pennsylvania neighborhood where both Jewish and Black communities live together as both work to manage racial tensions and pressures from the outside world. The stories span various generations and show what those outside dominate majorities have to manage in order to survive. It also shows how love and community can unite to make a difference.

***Dear Church, a Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in America (ELCA)* by Lenny Duncan**

- A very challenging book which made us consider our own implicit racism and what our responsibility is to address it in our church and in our neighborhoods.

***Devil in the Grove* by Gilbert King**

- The winner of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction, a historical account of how Thurgood Marshall (before he was a Supreme Court Justice) and the NAACP brought civil rights cases to courts throughout the county. It highlighted the huge legal challenges to correct injustices, how fragile some of those victories were, and how it could have all gone wrong.

***Go Back to Where You Came From: And Other Helpful Recommendations* by Wajahat Ali**

- This book is both a personal memoir and a reflective, critical analysis of what it means to live in this country as a son of immigrants, a person of color, and member of the Muslim faith. The author grew up in Fremont, California as the son of parents who had emigrated from Pakistan. As a child, Wjahat had thought he and his family were living what he refers to as the "Amreekan dream" of equal opportunity and success. However, while studying at the University of California, Berkeley, the 911 attack occurred and Wjahat's world changed with it. He then found himself suddenly coping with the realities of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and the revelation of deep-seated prejudices. As he saw it, Muslims had replaced communists as America's #1 enemy. Throughout his professional life, Ali achieves a law degree while also pursuing a writing career. His writing eventually becomes his voice to expose the harsh realities of systemic prejudices surrounding race, religion, and cultural differences. Using a unique combination humor and sharp societal critiques, this book brings to the reader an empathy for and increased understanding of those citizens in our country who do not feel they fully fit in or belong, how they must work twice as hard to get half as far, and that they are often considered to be suspect and foreign. The book poses the ultimate profound question of whether or not it is possible to fully assimilate as an American if one is not "white enough".

***Hell of a Book (The Altogether Factual, Wholly Bona Fide Story of a Big Dreams, Hard Luck, American-Made Mad Kid)* by Jason Mott**

- A Black author sets out on a cross-country publicity tour to promote his bestselling novel. Mott's novel also tells the story of Soot, a young Black boy living in a rural town in the recent past, and The Kid, a possibly imaginary child who appears to the author on his tour. The book references themes about family, art, money, police shootings and what it can mean to be Black in America.

***His Truth is Marching On* by Jon Meacham**

- A biography of John Lewis. We were so moved by his unwavering bravery and commitment to civil rights, as well as his deep Christian faith.

***How It Happens* by Jean Alicia Elster**

- This story line in this young adult book follows the lives of three generations of black women, one of whom is the author's maternal grandmother, Dorothy May Jackson. The setting begins in the South at the turn of the century. Addie Jackson, while married to a black man and through no choice of her own, bears three biracial daughters, the father being a white attorney from a prominent family. One of those daughters, Dorothy May, becomes a teacher, but never completes her formal degree as she is swept into marrying and bearing her own children while living in the industrial northern city of Detroit. One of Dorothy's daughters, Jean, confronts her mother and grandmother regarding her biracial ancestry and its complex ramifications. Jean finds her way to become a college educated black woman in the midst of challenging race relations and class divisions both in her country and within her own family.

***How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* by Clint Smith**

- Clint Smith sheds light on monuments and landmarks—those that accurately reflect the past and those that do not, in an effort to share intergenerational story of how slavery has been central in shaping our nation's collective history, and ourselves. It is the story of the Monticello Plantation in Virginia, the

estate where Thomas Jefferson wrote letters espousing the urgent need for liberty while enslaving more than four hundred people. It is the story of the Whitney Plantation, one of the only former plantations devoted to preserving the experience of the enslaved people whose lives and work sustained it. It is the story of Angola, a former plantation-turned-maximum-security prison in Louisiana that is filled with Black men who work across the 18,000-acre land for virtually no pay. And it is the story of Blandford Cemetery, the final resting place of tens of thousands of Confederate soldiers. The book highlights the legacy of slavery and its imprint on centuries of American history.

How to be an Antiracist by Ibrahim X. Kendi

- This book explored an approach to understanding and then uprooting racism and inequality in our society—and in ourselves. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi explored how to see all forms of racism clearly, understand their poisonous consequences, and work to oppose them in our systems and in ourselves. Kendi weaves together ethics, history, law, and science with his own personal story of awakening to antiracism. As a group, we found this book to be important in learning how to go beyond the awareness of racism to the next step: contributing to the formation of a just and equitable society.

James by Percival Everett

- The narrative follows the plot of *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain from the perspective of Jim, the enslaved. It includes a range of situations of enslaved people that he encounters and the choices the enslaved make in response, including to die. It also illuminates the behavior of the whites from an enslaved point of view. We read this controversial book to challenge us to look at an alternate point of view with a truer lens than the original “Huckleberry Finn”.

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption by Bryan Stevenson

- This book was an amazing examination of our criminal justice system, especially with respect to capital punishment. What we noted about this book is that while the author focused on one of his clients, Walter, there are so many more who were wrongly condemned and trapped in the capital punishment system. The author pointed out we all need mitigation at some point in our lives and none of us should be judged by the worst action in our life that we have taken. We examined the cruelty of the capital punishment system and wondered how much is invested in keeping it going. We were left wondering whether it is appropriate for the government to determine when people die.

Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI by David Grann

- In the 1920s, the richest people per capita in the world were members of the Osage Nation in Oklahoma. After oil was discovered beneath their land, the Osage rode in chauffeured automobiles, built mansions, and sent their children to study in Europe. Then, one by one, the Osage began to be killed off. The family of an Osage woman, Mollie Burkhart, became a prime target. One of her relatives was shot. Another was poisoned. And it was just the beginning, as more and more Osage were dying under mysterious circumstances, and many of those who dared to investigate the killings were themselves murdered. As the death toll rose, the newly created FBI took up the case, and the young director, J. Edgar Hoover, turned to a former Texas Ranger named Tom White to try to unravel the mystery. White put together an undercover team, including a Native American agent who infiltrated the region, and together with the Osage began to expose one of the most chilling conspiracies in American history

March Trilogy by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, illustrated by Nate Powell

- The *March* trilogy is an autobiographical black and white graphic novel trilogy about the civil rights movement, told through the perspective of civil rights leader and U.S. Congressman John Lewis.

Master Slave Husband Wife: An Epic Journey from Slavery to Freedom by Ilyon Woo

- The true story of Ellen and William Craft, who escaped slavery in 1848 with Ellen posing as a wealthy, disabled White man and William posing as “his” slave. They traveled over 1,000 miles using steamboats, carriages, and trains from where they were enslaved in Georgia to the free states of the North. They were never truly safe as their identity was at risk of being revealed by many. Along the way they became famous and were written about in newspapers across the country, speaking at events alongside Frederick Douglass. They were constantly fearful and so very brave as they were always at risk of being returned to their enslavers because of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850.

My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies by Resmaa Menakem

- Written by a licensed clinical social worker about the complex effects of racism and white privilege on all races. Provided exercises to work through our own reactions to racial trauma.

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander

- One of the more difficult books we read. It challenged us to reexamine most of what we had previously believed about governmental efforts to keep us safe and to address crime. An excellent resource for thinking through how we move forward with making decisions about what we fund and why. She wrote movingly how large segments of our society may have given up hope that the dominant majority is concerned with all in our nation, as opposed to just their own communities. We read the 10th anniversary edition of the first book which was published in 2010. The new edition included an extensive preface by the author, Michelle Alexander, discussing all that has changed and what has heartbreakingly remained the same in the criminal justice system and in our democracy since the book was published.

This Other Eden: A Novel by Paul Harding

- For over 50 years, a multiracial group of people made their homes on Apple Island, off the coast of Maine. They built small, basic houses and provided for themselves by farming and fishing. Their children were minimally educated. Although they were an impoverished population, they created a caring community for themselves. They were accepting of their neighbor’s differences and helped each other survive. However, by 1910, they were seen as undesirable by the mainlanders who regarded Apple Island as an eyesore. Rather than offering to improve the living conditions on Apple Island, the mainlanders threatened to destroy it, forcing the residents to abandon their homes. Some residents were placed in mental institutions while others drifted to places unknown. This book focuses on the dysfunctional relationship between the residents of Apple Island and the mainlanders. It raises questions about respecting community values and how we who have more substantial lives treat less fortunate people among us.

The Religion of Whiteness: How Racism Distorts Christian Faith by Michael O. Emerson and Glenn E. Bracey

- It was difficult to believe how many Christians are in fact believers in a “Religion of Whiteness”. The book was difficult for the group to believe as the premise was that there is a significant group of white Christians in America who in fact are believers in a “Religion of Whiteness”. The authors examined White Christian Nationalism and the role it plays in our country today. The book challenges us to examine whether we are defending the status quo in a way which is denying others the right to advance. In the book the authors argue some are conflating the issue of racial inequality and fear that those who describe themselves as “white” being disadvantaged, with the religion of Christianity itself.

Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause by Ty Seidule

- Ty Seidule, former soldier and head of the West Point history department, challenges the myths of the Confederate legacy - and explores why some of this country's oldest wounds have never healed. Ty Seidule grew up revering Robert E. Lee. From his southern childhood to his service in the US Army, and how every part of Seidule's life reinforced the Lost Cause myth: that Lee was the greatest man who ever lived, and that the Confederates were underdogs who lost the Civil War with honor. Now, as a retired brigadier general and Professor Emeritus of History at West Point, his view has radically changed. In a unique blend of history and reflection, Seidule deconstructs the truth about the Confederacy - that its undisputed primary goal was the subjugation and enslavement of Black Americans - and directly challenges the idea of honoring those who labored to preserve that system and committed treason in their failed attempt to achieve it.

Solito by Javier Zamora

- Zamora writes about what it was like for him as a nine-year-old to join a group of mostly adults and one other child to be brought to the US to join his parents. He described the journey of 3,000 miles (leaving his small town in El Salvador, through Guatemala and Mexico, and finally across the US Border). Zamora managed to both capture the terror (dangerous boat rides, being at risk from police and from criminals along the way, as well as exposure to the elements) and the kindness of his small group along the way. *Solito* describes what others are willing to do if they feel like they have no other choice but to risk everything on a chance of a safe life in the United States.

There, There by Tommy Orange

- This novel described the challenges of living as an urban Native American in our country's present day society. The prologue is a historically accurate narrative by the author, setting the backdrop of violence and genocide and how that history has been covered up and/or sanitized through the years. The novel is then written through the eyes of twelve characters of varying ages, stages and statuses of life. Yet all of their lives are intertwined in some way, and come together in the climax of the book which takes place at the Big Oakland Powwow in California. Many of the characters are suspended between knowing about and honoring the beauty of their Native culture, while at the same time trying to find their place in current American culture.

The Undocumented Americans by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio

- In the book the author, as one of the first undocumented immigrants to graduate from Harvard, describes some of the lives of other undocumented Americans: undocumented workers who were recruited into the federally funded Ground Zero cleanup after 9/11; people running botanicas in Miami (where people look for other options if they are unable to be covered by medical insurance or have access to other healthcare options because of their undocumented status); those prevented from access to clean water in Flint because of not having a government ID, and families separated due to parents being in a sanctuary).

The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett

- It introduced the subject of colorism and what sacrifices people make to integrate into the dominant society and what it costs to leave your family behind.

The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration by Isabel Wilkerson

- From 1915 to 1970, this exodus of almost six million people changed the face of America. Wilkerson compares this epic migration to the migrations of other peoples in history. Wilkerson tells this story through the lives of three unique individuals: Ida Mae Gladney, who in 1937 left sharecropping and

prejudice in Mississippi for Chicago, where she achieved quiet blue-collar success; George Starling, who in 1945 fled Florida for Harlem, where he endangered his job fighting for civil rights, saw his family fall, and finally found peace in God; and Robert Foster, who left Louisiana in 1953 to pursue a medical career. Wilkerson describes their often dangerous and overwhelming cross-country trips by car and train and their new lives in colonies that grew into ghettos, as well as how they changed these cities with southern food, faith, and culture and improved them with discipline, drive, and hard work. *Warmth of Other Suns* describes an internal immigration within the United States which is often overlooked.

White Fragility by Robin DiAngelo

- This book explored the counterproductive reactions white people have when their assumptions about race are challenged, and how these reactions maintain racial inequality. One challenging idea is to explore how racism is not a practice restricted to “bad people”. Referring to the defensive moves that white people make when challenged racially, white fragility is characterized by emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and by behaviors including argumentation and silence. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium and prevent any meaningful cross-racial dialogue. DiAngelo examines how white fragility develops, how it protects racial inequality, and what we can do to engage more constructively.

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Group Members: Lynn Barth, Judy Depaolis, Karen Devlin, Joan Durman, Claire Dutrow, Mary Eckberg, Chris Hernadi, Ryan Hughes, Judy Kuhagen, Deborah Larson, Cindy Morrow, Teresa Schellenger, and Alice Shaw.

Previous Members: Roxanne Englund, Vicar Hephzibah, Ann Lawrence, Lena Martikainan, Flo Ofili, Hugh Stevenson, and Linda Stennett.