

*The New Jim Crow*  
by  
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Resource Guide for Adult Formation

Six-week reading and reflection group about mass  
incarceration, racism, and the War on Drugs

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## Note from the Editor and How to Use this Guide:

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* was written by Michelle Alexander, a civil rights litigator and professor of law, and published in 2010. The book argues that our current system of mass incarceration in the United States is unprecedented, disproportionately incarcerates black men at extremely high rates, and has thus come to replace the Jim Crow segregation laws as our current form of mass racial control. To show how mass incarceration functions as a system of racial control, Alexander demonstrates how the War on Drugs functions in such a way that at all levels of the criminal justice system, people of color are unjustly treated and swept into the prison system, branded as felons for mainly nonviolent crimes, and are subjected to massive institutional discrimination for the rest of their lives. Most importantly, perhaps, Alexander shows how our dominant definition of “racism” as personal prejudice, instead of the *concrete effects of institutional systems, such as the criminal justice system, that subject people of color to human rights violations*, allow us to remain complicit in a racist society that purports to be “colorblind,” since it’s not *blackness* that is explicitly targeted but *criminality*.

Cornel West has called the book “secular bible for a new social movement in early twenty-first-century America.” Although, as Alexander clearly states in her introduction, her book is mainly a critique of our current system, and does not pretend to have a solution, *The New Jim Crow* has been regarded by many as a call to action. It is a transformative read that for many people who do not have direct experiences with or within the criminal justice system, and is a wake-up call to the fact that racism is alive and well in the United States on a massive institutional level.

In August of 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed, young black man, was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri. In response to his death, local and national networks of organizers sprung into action to call national mainstream attention to the regularity and systematic devaluing of the lives of people of color. Every 28 hours, a black person is killed by law enforcement or vigilante, which is comparable to rates of Jim Crow-era lynching. According to a report from the Sentencing Project in 2013, if current trends of incarceration continue, 1 in 3 African American males can expect to go to prison at some point in their lifetime. Arguably, we are finding ourselves in a time of social change, which inevitably entails wrestling with the surfacing of certain realities about race and racism that may feel uncomfortable. We are finding ourselves in a time when individuals and communities are searching for ways to have constructive conversations about these difficult events and topics.

Rev. Sylvia Miller-Mutia, Associate Rector at St. Gregory’s of Nyssa in San Francisco, and I worked together to see how much interest there was around starting up a book group about racism and mass incarceration. We ended up, with the help of other leaders connected to our communities, helping organize 5 book groups—one in

Richmond, two in San Francisco, and one in Berkeley, all with significant interest. Sylvia and I co-facilitated the group in Berkeley, and ran the reading & reflection group as a formation opportunity during Epiphany in January and February of 2015. It was our first time facilitating a reading group for *The New Jim Crow*.

After the conclusion of the group, we decided we wanted to offer the structure, questions, and materials we used as a resource for other Episcopal congregations in the Diocese of California that are seeking to have guided conversations about racism in the United States during this time of social change. We feel that it is an important formation resource to have for congregations grappling with these issues, and valuable way to build community within and between congregations. Education is the first step to action, and finding ways for individuals and congregations to remain committed to fighting racism in their local communities and in the United States at large. One important note this facilitation guide is built for someone who has close to no experience organizing or running an adult formation class or book group —*you do not necessarily need a trained facilitator to do this*. It would obviously be helpful if a trained facilitator was already available to help lead, but this guide will provide helpful tips for facilitators new to their role about group facilitation, including things we did that worked, things we did that maybe didn't work.

If you use this guide, please feel free to reach out to us and let us know how it's going. Let us know how we can be helpful or if we can answer any questions you may have. Thank you for your interest and your commitment to finding ways to talk about these difficult topics.

In Peace,  
*Em Kianka,*  
*Urban Peace Collaboration*

## Getting a Group Together

If you're reading this guide, you may already have a group together at your congregation that would like to read *The New Jim Crow*. If you do, this section will not be helpful for you. If you would like to get a group together, however, then we have outlined two main options and some strategies for you to help organize a group at your church.

### 1. Picking a Time and a Season

You may want to plan to organize the group's six-week course so that it thematically fits in with the Episcopal Church's liturgical calendar. When Sylvia and I organized these groups, Sylvia structured the course so that it coincided and was also thematically tied to Epiphany. The reflection group would also be a very appropriate Lenten study, for example. You can also feel free to organize the group after Easter, or run a summer group, when perhaps other activities may be slow, and there is a call for more programming, or a fall group, when people are returning from summer trips or vacations and are getting back into the swing of things.

### 2. Forming a Congregational Group

There are some significant benefits to organizing a group of people who are all members of the same church, and already have relationships with each other. Talking about racism and the War on Drugs can be an intense and sensitive subject for many people, and forming a group of people who already know each other may increase openness in discussion. Also, if you are a priest, or if your priest can be available to be present in the group, you or they may be available for pastoral support in case difficult conversations arise.

Forming a group in your own congregation may be really easy, or may prove difficult. Asking people to commit to a six-week discussion group can be a big commitment for many people. If you are starting this on your own, talk to your friends at church first. Talk with the members of the outreach or social justice group, if there is one. Make announcements in the bulletin or church newsletter. Tell people *why* this is important to do. Even if you form a group of four, that is great, and will be enough. Be grateful for whatever number of folks are in the group you organize.

### 3. Forming an Inter-Congregational or Interfaith Group

While there are benefits to a reading group wherein everyone already knows each other, there are also significant advantages to a group where not everyone knows each other. If you want to create an open community group, and invite friends and people from other congregations in the area, you can create a space where perhaps people are coming from various contexts—not only different congregations, but perhaps a diversity of cities or neighborhoods, with differing understandings and

experiences of the issues Alexander presents in the book. This would widen the spectrum of people present in the room, and foster a diversity of opinion and experience in conversation. It would also build community in such a way that reaches beyond congregational lines, and maybe even result in some kind of official or unofficial partnerships between small groups in congregations seeking to talk about and work towards ending racism.

This option may be more difficult, since it involves conducting outreach to other congregations and finding ways to advertise. There are lots of different ways to try to organize a group like this, depending on your involvement at church and amount of contacts at other churches. If you have friends or people you know at other congregations, reaching out to them is the first way to start. You can gauge potential levels of interest at their church, and ask them to spread the word. Ask them if they can submit announcements about the group to be posted in church bulletins or in a weekly newsletter. Ask your priest if they can reach out to their colleagues on your behalf about the group. Lastly, reach out to us. We can help connect you with other congregations.

You may even want to consider creating an ecumenical or interfaith group. Do you have friends from other Christian denominations or religious traditions who are interested in participating in this reading group? Including them, and asking them to do outreach in their own congregations or places of worship, will expand the diversity of the group in a different way, and would be a fruitful way of building community across different traditions.

#### **4. Logistics**

This section will cover some of the nitty-gritty logistics of running a group. Some of them may be obvious to some people, but for those who have never organized a program, this will guide you through some important details of running a book group:

##### **Setting a weekly meeting time and finding a space**

Once you know you have at least a few people who would like to participate, even if you haven't made an official announcement to your congregation, you may want to make sure you can find a weekly meeting time that works for the core, committed people you've found so far. If you are having difficulty finding people who are interested, you may need to make an announcement within your congregation or do outreach to other congregations before determining a time. You won't be able to find a time that works for everyone who would like to participate, so use your best judgment, and once you think you have at least a few people who will definitely attend, set a time. Trying to find a time for 15 people on a Doodle poll or through an email conversation can be very frustrating, and will not actually be productive. At the same time that you find a time that works

for people, you will also have to make sure a space is available in your congregation that you can reserve on a weekly basis for six consecutive weeks.

### **Collecting information about participants**

It is important, no matter how you advertise or spread the word about the group, that you ask the people participating to RSVP. This will make it essential that people who are interested commit to showing up, and you will have a way to collect the names and email addresses of everyone who would like to participate. This is an important way to stay in touch with the group, and also to perhaps generate conversation between sessions through emailing about relevant articles, videos, and questions.

### **Availability of food and tea & coffee**

Lastly, something that Sylvia and I found is that—especially if your group meets in the evening, after work for many people—you may want to provide snacks and also tea and coffee for people who may need a pick-me-up after work. Nothing too complicated—some pretzels, chocolates, and fruit. It could also be a good idea to develop a rotation in the group, so one person volunteers to bring snacks each week.

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## Agenda and Structure

We used the same basic structure and agenda at each of our meetings of the group:

1. 6:30 - Opening Prayer Service
2. Welcome & Introductions (if needed)
3. Check in & Review Group Covenant (if needed)
4. 7:00 – Book Discussion
  - a. 7:00-7:30 – Small Group Discussion
  - b. 7:45-8:15 – Large Group Discussion
5. 8:15 – Closing Prayer Service

This agenda stayed constant, with the exception of the first session, but our material for the book discussion varied from week to week. In the next few pages, we will provide detailed information about opening and closing prayer, making a group covenant, and the material for each chapter discussion.



## Opening and Closing Prayer

A great way to ground the reading and reflection group in the Episcopal tradition and liturgical context is to open and close with a worship component that remains consistent throughout the duration of the book group. It also is a great way to always end the group with singing and prayer, especially if conversation has become tense in any way. Opening and closing prayer should take around 15 minutes each.

### Opening Prayer

Basic components of an opening prayer can include:

1. An opening song
2. Opening/gathering words
3. Some brief, shared silences
4. A reading
5. Closing song
6. Lighting a candle in the beginning and using a singing bowl to signify the beginning and endings of silences

Here is the opening prayer that Sylvia and I used:

#### **Gathering Words**

Our help is in the name of the eternal God  
**who is making the heavens and the earth.**

Holy One, send out your light and your truth  
**that they may guide us and lead us to your holy hill and to your dwelling**

May the angels of God guard us this night  
**and quieten the powers that bind us**

May the Spirit of God be our guide  
**and lead us towards justice and peace**

*Share a word or a phrase you bring with you this night...*

#### **Silence**

**Reading** TBA (See Appendix)

*Hear a reading from....*

**READING**

*Share a word or phrase from the reading...*

#### **Silence**

Sylvia created an appendix of readings from the Hebrew scriptures, including the prophetic texts, Exodus and Leviticus; the Gospel, including Luke; from poets such as Maya Angelou, and other readings from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Participants in the group also often brought readings or poems that were meaningful to them, and we would use them in opening and closing prayer.

### **Closing Prayer**

The basic structure for a closing prayer can include elements such as:

1. An opening song
2. A reflection & call to action
3. Prayer
4. Thanksgivings & Intercessions
5. Brief periods of silences
6. Closing Song
7. Parting Words/Blessing

Here is the closing prayer liturgy that Sylvia created, and that we used in our gatherings each time:

## CLOSING

Song *Open my Heart*

Reflection & Call to Action (based on Baptismal Covenant from the Book of Common Prayer, adapted for multi-faith gathering)

*Hear the call of the Spirit:*

*Will you continue in the ancestor's teaching and in fellowship with the faithful, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?*

*Will you persevere in resisting evil, and forgive others as you have been forgiven?*

*Will you proclaim by word and example of Good News of God?*

*Will you seek and serve God in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?*

*Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?*

### Silence

*What call do you hear from the Spirit tonight? Share a word or phrase you carry with you as we prepare to leave this place.*

### Silence

*Let us pray...*

**Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

*For whom do we pray this night? Call out your own prayers and intercessions.  
(Pause as people offer their own intercessions.)*

*For what do we give thanks this night? Call out your own thanksgivings.  
(Pause as people offer their own thanksgivings.)*

*Keep watch, dear Lord,*

**with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.**

Closing Song (*Hamba Nathi: Come Walk with us the journey is Long*)

*Let us bless the Lord!*

**Thanks be to God!**

We sometimes also, after the second brief period of silence, re-read the text read aloud during opening prayer, and shared again as a group a word we heard from the reading. Repeating the reading can be a good way of grounding the conversation in either

scripture or other readings, and have an opportunity to hear the text's message again in the context of the discussion that happened in between opening and closing prayer.

## Making and Reviewing a Group Covenant

A group covenant is an important way of setting boundaries and guidelines for group conversation throughout the duration of the six-week series. Creating a covenant isn't like creating a set of rules that people will get in trouble for not following, but it functions rather as a helpful reminder of what guidelines the group has mutually agreed help uphold healthy conversation and communication.

You will want to create a group covenant during the first meeting of your book group. Take some time to do this (at least 15 or 20 minutes), and do not worry if it cuts into the discussion of the book—this is important. Get a large piece of paper, tape it up on the wall, and ask the participants gathered what will be important to making sure they have smooth conversation, and what will also be important for mediating possible conflict and dealing with difficult subjects. The content of a group covenant varies from group to group, and depends on what is important to the participants, but there are some very basic guidelines that are generally beneficial to most group discussions:

1. **Step Up, Step Back/W.A.I.T. (Why Am I Talking?)** — This basic guideline addresses the inevitable fact that there is a diversity of personalities in the room, and also some people who process thoughts and ideas externally and some people who process their thoughts internally. In order to create space for people who are either more introverted, shy, or need to take some time to process their thoughts before speaking, “step up, step back,” asks the people who know they have a tendency to dominate conversations or talk a lot to intentionally “step back” to help create that space. Conversely, this guideline also encourages shyer folks in the room to challenge themselves to “step up” and participate in group conversation.
2. **Use “I” statements** — This phrase refers to how we share our experiences in a group, and encourages participants to ground their thoughts, insights, and beliefs in their own experiences instead of making generalizations. For example, as a white person, if I were to say something like, “We don't have to worry about being stopped and frisked for drugs,” I could invalidate the feelings and experiences of people of color in the room. Even saying something like, “In this world, we've been so lucky...” If I'm saying that, I really mean that *I* feel that *I've* been lucky. I cannot assume the experiences of the other participants. Additionally, this also means, that if somebody feels hurt by another participant's words or actions, articulating their feeling using an “I” statement instead of starting with “you,” e.g. “I feel frustrated by what you just said” vs. “You're wrong.”
3. **No interrupting/side conversations** — This one is pretty self-explanatory—no side conversations, and no interrupting whoever is speaking. This encourages deep listening and participants to be part of the same, single conversation.

4. **Assume good intentions** — Assuming good intentions is a much more difficult task than it first sounds. This idea is a great one to refer back to throughout the duration of the group. When something feels hurtful, it can be very difficult to believe that the person who said the hurtful comment acted on good intentions. This is, however, an important guideline to establish in anticipation of either difficult or heated conversations.
5. **Confidentiality** — Assessing and determining the group's collective boundaries about sharing information and stories shared in the group is an important practice. Participants may want to process conversations or topics from the group outside of allotted reading group time, and so it is good to establish the group's comfort level with what is shared with other people.

These five are the most important points to bring up when making a group covenant. Other participants will bring up other points, or may need some time to parse through the meanings of some of these phrases. It is important to make sure that all the participants understand and consent to the entire group covenant. After the facilitator has written out the covenant, the group has taken some time to bring up boundaries that are important for them, and everyone has agreed upon the covenant you have created, the group can move on. It is important, however, to sometimes refer back to the covenant in the beginning of each session of the reading and reflection group. Have everyone go around and each say a bullet point. If the group, at a certain point, feels the need to add another idea, that is also an important way to use the covenant and let it guide group dynamics and conversations.

## Small Groups

Depending on the size of your group, there may be no need for small groups. If you have at least eight or ten people, however, it may be helpful to break out into smaller groups for some of the allotted discussion time.

There are also some important advantages and disadvantages to having small groups. If you have a larger group, certainly, it is an advantage to create a space and time for conversation between fewer people, since there will be less time for individuals to share in a large group. It also helps create a supportive space for people who are either introverted, shy, or internally process their thoughts and insights to share more. Lastly, it may feel safer for participants to share more personal experiences or thoughts with only a few other people, and it helps people to get to know each other better.

There are also some advantages and disadvantages to staying in the same small group for each session. Remaining in the same, assigned small group will build consistency and trust between the participants in each group. Switching up the groups, however, particularly in a large reading group, ensures that participants get to participate in small groups with more people, and thus get to know others. There is no right answer, and what you decide most depends on the particulars of the group you have gathered, and what participants want to do.

If you have a small enough group, however, you may feel that there is no need for breaking into even smaller groups. Even if you have eight or ten people, you may want to ask the participants about their preferences, and what would be most helpful for them. If no one feels a need for creating splitting up the discussion time, then there is no reason to create small groups. One of the potential disadvantages of breaking into small groups is the possibility that the group will not stay on task, or will get sidetracked by other conversational topics. Some people feel like, for this reason, small groups detract from the potential for productive conversation within a larger group. If you do form small groups in your book group, it is a good idea to ask a handful of people, depending on the number of small groups you anticipate having, to act as a facilitator for each group. Their job is mainly make sure that conversation stays on track, and also to make sure that everyone gets a turn to speak.

## Demographics in the Reading Group

Each group of participants will be different, clearly depending on the congregation, its location, and whether it's a community group that involves either participants from multiple congregations, denominations, or religious traditions. Depending on the demographics of the group, the facilitator or organizer of the group may want to consider how to handle racial diversity within the group. For example, say the group of participants is predominantly white, but there are two African American men in the group, and one person who identifies as Latina. They will be participating in a group of mainly white people who, although well-intentioned, may end up saying some hurtful or unconsciously racist comments. If people struggle with the text, the three people of color in the room may inadvertently become the rest of the group's educators. The burden of education around racism routinely falls on people of color, and it is unfair to continually place these those participants in that role, unless they explicitly volunteer to do so.

One method of dealing with these potential racial dynamics in the larger reading group is to by caucusing. Instead of forming random small groups to break out into small group discussion, you can intentionally create a space for white people and a space for people of color to separately process their reactions to the text. This would eliminate the amount of times an African American man, for example, who has most likely known for much longer, if not for his whole life, the ways in which the prison system is racist, would have to hear a white participant proclaim their surprise at learning about institutional racism, or hear another participant express their skepticism. There's nothing wrong with those two other participants—the one who is surprised and the one who is skeptical. Those are two important, valid reactions to the text. It is important to be conscious, however, of racial dynamics in the room, and the extent to which the space is feels comfortable or safe for everyone present.

There is significant value to not caucusing during the large group discussion. Building a multiracial space entails learning about each other's different experiences and view points, but arguably this is achieved in the healthiest way when there are spaces for white people to process their reactions and thoughts with other white people, without subjecting people of color to hurtful or frustrating comments. Then, rejoining the two or more groups for larger discussion can encourage participants to see each other complexly, and create a space where people can constructively learn from each other.



## Session 1: Introduction and The Rebirth of Caste

The first meeting of the book group is the only one that looks a little different than the following five. In order to create more space for the participants to get to know each other a little more, and to make sure we had adequate time to create a group covenant, we allowed for less time for discussion of the book than we normally would. Here is the structure we used:

Proposed Agenda:

**6:30 Opening Prayer Service & Introductions**

**7:00-7:20 Group Covenant**

**7:20-8:15 Sharing & Large Group Discussion**

*Share a short quote from the text that struck you*

**8:15 Closing Prayer Service**

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### **General Questions:**

As you read and engaged the material in this week's chapter:

- 1) What was your reaction?
- 2) What did you find most surprising?
- 3) What did you find most disturbing?
- 4) What challenged you?
- 5) What experiences from your own life came to mind?
- 6) What does your faith/spiritual practice/religious belief have to do with it?
- 7) What do you wonder?
- 8) How do you feel called to respond?

During the first week, we took a little longer for introductions, particularly because our Berkeley reading group had participants from different congregations in the area. After making the group covenant, we turned to discussion about the readings from the week. We asked participants, prior to the first session, to come prepared to share a quote from the reading that week that spoke to them, and we used a process of mutual invitation to share the quotes aloud in a full group. Mutual invitation is a facilitation style that encourages deep listening, and also helps people learn each other's names in a new group. After the first person volunteers to share, it is their responsibility to invite another participant to share. Everyone takes turns like this until each participant has shared. Sharing quotes from the text helped prime the group for the ways in which the text

engaged, challenged, and inspired participants. We felt it was an important way for participants to get to know each other through engagement with the text, and that it was very effective. After everyone had shared, we opened up conversation about the text. It is important to note here that our general questions about the readings stayed the same throughout the duration of the reading group. Usually we included some questions specific to the reading from that week, but in this first session, people were eager to discuss the quotes that they had chosen and brought to the session.

An important change we made to the first session was that, although our general structure included breaking out into small groups, we decided to stay in the full group for the first session. We had around 22 to 25 people in attendance, so it was a very large group. We asked them about whether they'd find small groups in future sessions helpful, and the majority of people answered yes. At the end of the first session, if you have decided to break into small groups in future sessions, it would be good to ask, depending on the number of small groups you would have, a few people to facilitate them. They do not need to be trained facilitators either, but they should be people who are engaged in the process and willing to make sure conversation stays on task.

## Session 2: The Lockdown

### **Proposed Agenda:**

6:30 Opening Prayer Service  
7:00-7:30 Small Group Discussion  
7:30-8:15 Large Group Discussion  
8:15 Closing Prayer Service

### **Small Group Process:**

- 1) Take a few moments to briefly review introductions and check in
- 2) Take 3-5 minutes in silence for people to read through the questions and reflect internally.
- 3) Using a process of mutual invitation, allow each person an opportunity to share for ~3 minutes on any question(s) of their choice with no interruption. Allow a short time of silence between each sharing.
- 4) Once everyone has had the opportunity to share once, the group may continue by discussing any relevant questions/topics/experiences that emerge from the sharing.

### **General Questions:**

As you read and engaged the material in this week's chapter:

- 1) What was your reaction?
- 2) What did you find most surprising?
- 3) What did you find most disturbing?
- 4) What challenged you?
- 5) What experiences from your own life came to mind?
- 6) What does your faith/spiritual practice/religious belief have to do with it?
- 7) What do you wonder?
- 8) How do you feel called to respond?

### **Digging into the Text:**

1. On page 71, Alexander writes, "The 'drug courier profiles' utilized by the DEA and other law enforcement agencies for drug sweeps on highways, as well as in airports and train stations, are notoriously unreliable...as legal scholar David Cole has observed, 'in practice, the drug courier profile is a scattershot hodgepodge of traits and characteristics so expansive that it potentially justifies stopping anybody and everybody.' The profile can include traveling with luggage, traveling without luggage, driving an expensive car, driving a car that needs repairs, driving with out of state license plates, driving a rental car, driving with 'mismatched occupants,' acting too calm, acting too nervous, dressing casually, wearing expensive clothing or jewelry..."

Do you buy Cole and Alexander's argument that there is actually no such thing as 'suspicious behavior'? Why or why not?

2. Did you previously know about the financial incentives that have motivated local law enforcement to increase drug arrests (Page 77)? What has been your experience or understanding of the War of Drugs from media and from in your community? On page 78, Alexander argues that the War on Drugs is not actually a war to be won. What does that mean, and what implications does that have for the communities affected by the War on Drugs?

3. Is drug use a criminal justice problem, or a public health problem, or both? If you could re- envision our current system, what would the criminal justice system's role be in regard to drugs and drug use in the U.S.?

4. What do you make of the power of the prosecutor (Page 89)? Does that seem fair? How could it be different?

5. The title of this chapter is "The Lockdown." As Alexander outlines in the opening pages, the purpose of this chapter is to explain how the number of people in jail or prison for a drug offense has increased by 1,100 percent since 1980 (Page 60). What do you make of this enormous increase in drug arrests, and what do you make of the role of the federal government and the Supreme Court in all this? Why do you think this has happened? If you think that this system is unjust, how and why do you think it's come into being?

## Session 3: The Color of Justice

### **Proposed Agenda:**

6:30 Opening Prayer Service  
7:00-7:30 Small Group Discussion  
7:30-8:15 Large Group Discussion  
8:15 Closing Prayer Service

### **Small Group Process:**

- 1) Take a few moments to briefly review introductions and check in
- 2) Take 3-5 minutes in silence for people to read through the questions and reflect internally.
- 3) Using a process of mutual invitation, allow each person an opportunity to share for ~3 minutes on any question(s) of their choice with no interruption. Allow a short time of silence between each sharing.
- 4) Once everyone has had the opportunity to share once, the group may continue by discussing any relevant questions/topics/experiences that emerge from the sharing.

### **General Questions:**

As you read and engaged the material in this week's chapter:

- 1) What was your reaction?
- 2) What did you find most surprising?
- 3) What did you find most disturbing?
- 4) What challenged you?
- 5) What experiences from your own life came to mind?
- 6) What does your faith/spiritual practice/religious belief have to do with it?
- 7) What do you wonder?
- 8) How do you feel called to respond?

### **Digging into the Text:**

1. On page 101, Alexander writes, "This dramatically changed racial climate has led defenders of mass incarceration to insist that our criminal justice system, whatever its past sins, is now largely fair and nondiscriminatory. They point to violent crime rates in the African American community as a justification for the staggering number of black men who find themselves behind bars." How does this sit with you? Do you find that this is the dominant narrative that you hear from media, and you've previously learned or embraced as true?

2. Much of Alexander's discussion in this chapter focuses on the concept of "colorblindness." What do you think of this word? Do you think that colorblindness is

part of the way to building a world that promotes justice, equity, and compassion for all people? How else should we treat race?

3. Alexander discusses implicit biases on pages 106 and 107. Have you heard of implicit bias before? Have you ever taken a test that measures your implicit biases? When do you think implicit biases turn into explicit biases? Is it even possible to separate the two?

4. In Alexander's description of *McClesky v. Kemp*, she shows how the Supreme Court closes its doors on anyone who brings up claims of racial bias unless there's "clear evidence of conscious, discriminatory intent" (114). What was your reaction to this? Do you think there's a way to prove something is racist without proving intent?

5. Alexander cites at least four major Supreme Court cases in this chapter that have shaped both our new racial caste system. There's no easy way to pose this question, but why do you think the Supreme Court has made these decisions that have both institutionalized and perpetuated racism? Can we blame individual judges? Is it the fault of the idea of "colorblindness"? Is it built into the foundations of our notions of justice and the justice system as a whole? How would we go about changing the damage that's been done?

## Session 4: The Cruel Hand

### **Proposed Agenda:**

- 6:30 Opening Prayer Service
- 6:45-7:45 Small Group Discussion
- 7:45-8:15 Large Group Discussion
- 8:15 Closing Prayer Service

### **Small Group Process:**

- 1) Take a few moments to briefly review introductions and check in
- 2) Take 3-5 minutes in silence for people to read through the questions and reflect internally.
- 3) Using a process of mutual invitation, allow each person an opportunity to share for ~3 minutes on any question(s) of their choice with no interruption. Allow a short time of silence between each sharing.
- 4) Once everyone has had the opportunity to share once, the group may continue by discussing any relevant questions/topics/experiences that emerge from the sharing.

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### **General Questions:**

As you read and engaged the material in this week's chapter:

- 1) What was your reaction?
- 2) What did you find most surprising?
- 3) What did you find most disturbing?
- 4) What challenged you?
- 5) What experiences from your own life came to mind?
- 6) What does your faith/spiritual practice/religious belief have to do with it?
- 7) What do you wonder?
- 8) How do you feel called to respond?

### **Digging into the Text:**

1. On page 141, Alexander writes, "Today a criminal freed from prison has scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a freed slave or a black person living "free" in Mississippi at the height of Jim Crow." Do you buy this argument? Does it feel counter-intuitive? Why do you think that is?
2. In Chapter 4, Alexander breaks down discriminatory policies in housing, employment, food distribution, and voting, that deny access to folks with a felony on their record. Did you know about all these policies? Do you think that shelter, a job, food, the right to vote should be basic rights granted to every citizen, regardless of criminal history?

3. On page 162, Alexander borrows scholar Kathryn Russell- Brown's term "*criminalblackman*." What do you think of this term? Why do you think it is powerful?
4. "...It is helpful to step back and put the behavior of young black men who appear to embrace "gangsta culture" in the proper perspective. There is absolutely nothing abnormal or surprising about a severely stigmatized group embracing their stigma. Psychologists have long observed that when people feel hopelessly stigmatized, a powerful coping strategy- - often the only apparent route to self- esteem- - is embracing one's stigmatized identity." (pg. 170- 171) Did this feel surprising to you? Was it helpful to your understanding of "gangsta culture"? Can you relate at all to this psychological phenomena?
5. Alexander writes on page 176, "Rather than shaming and condemning an already deeply stigmatized group, we, collectively, can embrace them- - not necessarily their behavior, but them- - their humanness. As the saying goes, "You gotta hate the crime, but love the criminal." This is not a mere platitude; it is a prescription for liberation." What do you think of this charge to us? How do you think this could concretely play out in society, community, and individual relationships?



## Session 5: The New Jim Crow

### **Proposed Agenda:**

- 6:30 Opening Prayer Service
- 6:45-7:45 Small Group Discussion
- 7:75-8:15 Large Group Discussion
- 8:15 Closing Prayer Service

### **Small Group Process:**

- 1) Take a few moments to briefly review introductions and check in
- 2) Take 3-5 minutes in silence for people to read through the questions and reflect internally.
- 3) Using a process of mutual invitation, allow each person an opportunity to share for ~3 minutes on any question(s) of their choice with no interruption. Allow a short time of silence between each sharing.
- 4) Once everyone has had the opportunity to share once, the group may continue by discussing any relevant questions/topics/experiences that emerge from the sharing.

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### **General Questions:**

As you read and engaged the material in this week's chapter:

- 1) What was your reaction?
- 2) What did you find most surprising?
- 3) What did you find most disturbing?
- 4) What challenged you?
- 5) What experiences from your own life came to mind?
- 6) What does your faith/spiritual practice/religious belief have to do with it?
- 7) What do you wonder?
- 8) How do you feel called to respond?

### **Digging into the Text:**

Turn this sheet over for more questions specific to this week's reading.

1. “‘The system is not run by a bunch of racists,’ the apologist would explain. ‘It’s run by people who are trying to fight crime.’ That response is predictable because most people assume that racism, and racism, and racial systems generally, are fundamentally a function of attitudes. Because mass incarceration is officially colorblind, it seems inconceivable that the system could function much like a racial caste system” (183) How else could we define racism that would help us to identify the ways in which mass incarceration functions as a racial caste system?

2. On page 208, Alexander writes, “White drug ‘criminals’ are collateral damage in the War on Drugs because they have been harmed by a war declared with blacks in

mind. While this circumstance is horribly unfortunate for them, it does create important opportunities for a multiracial, bottom- up resistance movement, one in which people of all races can claim a clear stake. For the first time in our nation's history, it may become readily apparent to whites how they, too, can be harmed by anti- black racism- - a fact that, until now, has been difficult for many to grasp." How else does anti- black racism hurt whites? Why else should white people be committed to ending mass incarceration and ultimately racism?

3. "The genius of the current caste system, and what most distinguishes it from its predecessors, is that it appears voluntary. People choose to commit crimes, and that's why they are locked up or locked out, we are told...but herein lies the trap. All people make mistakes. All of us are sinners. All of use are criminals." (215) How does this sit with you? What experiences does it bring up? How does it relate to your faith?

## Session 6: The Fire Next Time

### **Proposed Agenda:**

6:30 Opening Prayer Service & Sharing

*Share a short quote from the text that you find inspiring or hopeful, or one that points you towards a future action or direction*

7:00-7:45 Small Group Discussion

7:45-8:15 Large Group Discussion (Where do we go from here?)

8:15 Closing Prayer Service

### **Small Group Process:**

- 1) Take a few moments to briefly review introductions and check in
- 2) Take 3-5 minutes in silence for people to read through the questions and reflect internally.
- 3) Using a process of mutual invitation, allow each person an opportunity to share for ~3 minutes on any question(s) of their choice with no interruption. Allow a short time of silence between each sharing.
- 4) Once everyone has had the opportunity to share once, the group may continue by discussing any relevant questions/topics/experiences that emerge from the sharing.

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### **General Questions:**

As you read and engaged the material in this week's chapter:

- 1) What was your reaction?
- 2) What did you find most surprising?
- 3) What did you find most disturbing?
- 4) What challenged you?
- 5) What experiences from your own life came to mind?
- 6) What does your faith/spiritual practice/religious belief have to do with it?
- 7) What do you wonder?
- 8) How do you feel called to respond?

### **Digging into the Text:**

1. How can we do our part to challenge "colorblindness"? How can we talk about it to friends, family, colleagues, etc.?
2. On page 241 to 242, Alexander quotes Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech about indifference to racial groups, and clarifies that many of the people complicit with racism have the best intentions. He then says, "Jesus was right about those men who crucified them. They knew not what they did. They were inflicted by a terrible

blindness." How does our faith help us understand the racial indifference Alexander describes? How does it show us the path to right relationship and reconciliation?

3. What has been your understanding and opinion of affirmative action? How did Alexander's argument challenge it? What's your reaction to her argument?

4. How is Alexander calling us to action in the last few pages of the book?

In this session, we asked participants to bring a quote from the last chapter that they found inspiring or hopeful, similar to the first session of the group. We were hoping that in asking participants to do this, we could create a space for conversation in the larger group about what's next for the group.

## Next Steps

There is a deep need in our congregations for a structured space to have constructive conversations about race and racism in the United States. These conversations about important to both individual and collective processing of the events that took and are still taking place in Ferguson, and the subsequent local and national conversations about race relations, police violence, and protests in the Bay Area and beyond. Although the focus of Michelle Alexander's book is primarily our prison system, she brilliantly establishes the appropriate historical and political context that's necessary to having informed conversations about racism in the United States.

As people and institutions of faith, we are being called to action by our siblings in Christ who are been in pain, and have long been in pain. We must find ways to first transform ourselves and our communities, commit ourselves to this call to action, and then figure out how to best support the work of our current local and national black leaders who are fighting this current system that systematically devalues and enacts violence toward black bodies. The beginning of this, for those of us who have the privilege of not directly interacting or experiencing racism and/or the criminal justice system, is educating ourselves. Then, after we have educated ourselves, we can then discern what kind of action feels most appropriate to take.

Depending on the particular group, perhaps participants are entering the group with the hope or expectation that reading is the first step and action is the next. Perhaps, throughout the duration of the discussion series, participants will begin to seek to find concrete ways take action. And perhaps, at the conclusion of the group, participants will not want to engage in action, but will want to keep reading and engaging in education. All of these are great ways to take a next step after the conclusion of the group. The important thing is to engage in a next step depending on the consensus of the group. If discussions about "privilege" came up, with an expressed interest in finding resources and other readings about privilege, for example, that would be a completely logical next step. If a group is ready to form a task force, for example, to take actions to help support social change, then that's great. The group could also decide to bring in a speaker during an adult education hour and create a space for larger conversation within their congregation. There are many possibilities for continuing engagement. Here are some key resources and ideas:

1. Commit, as a group and as individuals, to have penpals in prison. Black&Pink, which focuses on LGBTQ prisoners' rights, has a great penpal program: <http://www.blackandpink.org/pen-pals/step-2-choose-your-pen-pals/>
2. Bring in a speaker during an adult education hour and create a space for larger conversation within the congregation.
3. Form a support group wherein participants support each other's efforts to have conversations with friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances about racism, or could continue to collectively process racism in participants' lives
4. Connect with organizations like The Ella Baker Center in Oakland, San Francisco Organizing Project/Peninsula Interfaith Action, and start following #BlackLivesMatter and BlackOut Collective on social media. Show up to actions that they have.

5. Consider organizing a special collection at your congregation to donate to #BlackLivesMatter.

Lastly, feel free to reach out to the Urban Peace Collaboration for more resources, books for continuing formation, or ideas for actions. We would love to know how the group has gone, what kinds of conversations came up, and how we can best support your ministry.