



Faith & Action Project

at Christian Theological Seminary

Ten Things We Learned

Fall 2018 Event

A truly powerful evening, the Faith & Action event “**Poverty: Examining Roots, Working Toward Solutions,**” welcomed an audience of some 2,000 people – members of congregations, nonprofits and other community leaders – to spend the evening listening in on a passionate conversation about race, incarceration, poverty and more.

Our featured guest, *New York Times* best-selling author Michelle Alexander (author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*) was outstanding and challenging as she engaged with local guests Indy Chamber President and CEO Michael Huber, EmployIndy President and CEO Angela Carr Klitzsch, and Frank Thomas, Director of the PhD Program in African American Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric and the Nettie Sweeney and Hugh Th. Miller Professor of Homiletics at Christian Theological Seminary. Each speaker conveyed a sense of urgency in encouraging the community to act in response to Indianapolis’ poverty crisis.

Following are some key themes from their conversation.

- 1. Our criminal justice system has decimated communities of color.** When the nation replaced the War on Poverty with the War on Drugs, Alexander said, the result was a system of racial and social control that incarcerated record numbers of Americans, with a disproportionate number of them being African-American males. Whole communities were devastated, and the impact continues even after people leave prison, as they deal with the financial, civic and social costs of living as convicted felons. As a result, criminal justice has become a big factor in the conversation surrounding poverty.
- 2. Our criminal justice system is a massive, entrenched and powerful industry.** The increase in prison populations sparked a massive growth in private companies “cashing in on those who are held captive,” Alexander said. Virtually every aspect of prison life – email, phone calls, basic needs – carries a fee that is paid to a private company.
- 3. We’ve got to take race out of the equation.** In the U.S., a white man with a criminal record is more likely to be hired than a black man without a record. Prisons are disproportionately packed with black men. The War on Drugs affected black communities more than others. Such race-based inequities must be recognized, addressed and removed.
- 4. In Indianapolis, we need to “get real.”** The business community has to stop simply cheering about our successes and recognize that we have a serious poverty problem. Huber pointed out that, in the last decade, the city has seen an 80 percent increase in the number of people living in poverty, and we are ranked among the nation’s five worst cities in terms of economic mobility. “A segment of the community is growing fast, but poverty is growing, too,” Huber said.
- 5. The business case for attacking poverty: It’s the right thing to do.** While Carr Klitzsch said, “There is a good business and economic argument” for reducing poverty, she agreed with Huber when he said the real reason businesses should get involved is, “It’s the right thing to do.” Carr Klitzsch added that the business community needs to help address the city’s concentrations of

poverty and the factors, such as food deserts and lack of access to transportation and child care, that block people from getting and keeping jobs.

6. **Colorblindness isn't the answer.** Some people consider it virtuous to say they "don't see color," but a couple of panelists noted that real progress comes when you recognize differences but show love nonetheless. "If we are blind to one another we can't care for one another," Alexander said. Thomas added that the key question is, "Whom do you see as equal?"
7. **Love is essential.** At one point in her career, Alexander said she felt that perhaps Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's admonition to love one another wasn't enough. But she has come to see that love is the real key to solving our greatest problems. "What we need isn't just a political or economic revolution," Alexander said. "We need a revolution of values." Thomas added that we must get to a point to where we say to everyone, "I want for *your* children what I want for *my* children."
8. **Electronic surveillance of released prisoners represents "The Newest Jim Crow."** As the bricks-and-mortar prison system loses favor, private prison firms are shifting their business plans to profit from the electronic monitoring of the formerly incarcerated. Ankle trackers, GPS monitors, home surveillance and more could be a highly profitable process for effectively locking people out of certain zones and communities. Alexander described this new system of punishment as "The Newest Jim Crow, and added, "We have to be careful about what we call progress."
9. **We must recognize our role in the problem.** We all play roles in the problems associated with poverty, panelists said. We voted for politicians who embraced the "tough on crime" moniker, and pushed them to jail more people ("We all built those walls," Alexander said). We watch as poor whites and poor blacks allow their races to divide them rather than joining around their shared poverty. We push for more and better for ourselves, our families, our schools and our communities without considering those who have less and are worse off.
10. **We must take action.** Employ Indy President and CEO Angela Carr Klitzsch called on the audience to get involved, by voting, mentoring and encouraging those who are trying to improve their lives.

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