"Red & Blue, Black & White"

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On a cold morning in February, hundreds of students flocked to the B.J. Haan Auditorium. They were there to hear First Mondays speaker Jemar Tisby, president of the Reformed African-American Network and host of Pass the Mic, a podcast about race, culture, and the church.

“Let me start with this very easy question,” Tisby said: “How did you vote in the last election?” Instead of asking the audience to answer aloud, he made a prediction.

“We have some statistics,” he gestured to the PowerPoint above him. “If you are a white evangelical Protestant, you probably voted Republican. If you are a black Protestant, you probably voted Democratic.”

Our headline is a nod to the February First Mondays talk given by Jemar Tisby, who challenged the Dordt community to consider the particular history of African Americans in this country. He encouraged Christians to work toward unity that transcends race, ethnicity, class, and political affiliation.
Tisby’s talk addressed the entanglement of race, religion, and politics in America, pairing historical analysis with poignant personal reflections.

“Though religion, race, and politics are all related, I think for Christians they have become so tangled up that it’s hard to tell them apart. And it’s hard to tell what we worship: politics or our Redeemer,” Tisby said.

That has resulted in a divided church. With many years of experience working for racial reconciliation, Tisby hopes to provide practical steps toward Christian unity that transcends partisan politics.

“We’re all in God’s house,” he said, but “we have run off to our own rooms, slammed the door, and locked it. And now you need a secret knock—the right combination of race and political beliefs—to get in the door. Brothers and sisters, this should not be so. Not in the household of God.”

Tisby’s talk was a continuation of conversations about race that have been taking place, formally and informally, across Dordt’s campus.

**RACE AS A GOSPEL ISSUE**

Race, like many other hot-button topics, often gets caught up in political and ideological debates. But for Aaron Baart, the dean of chapel at Dordt, racial reconciliation is not just a political issue: it is a Gospel one. In studying the book of Acts, Baart came to realize just how diverse God’s kingdom is—a kingdom that included battle-hardened Roman centurions, lowly Samaritans, rich matriarchs, and diseased beggars.

“Humanity’s sin has always been exclusion,” says Baart. “We’ve always erred on the side of self-protection, of fear of the other. And every time that has been a direct contrast to what God has asked of us.”

“If our reading of Scripture informed our political affiliation, and not the other way around, we would have no choice but to come to terms with this,” he says.

“Anyone who wants to take Christianity at face value needs to be part of that conversation. Either you take seriously God’s vision for the church—Jerusalem, Judea, and the ends of the earth—or you don’t.”

Dr. Leah Zuidema, Dordt’s associate provost, says, “For us at Dordt, it’s not about following a trend. It’s about biblical faithfulness and the narrative we see in Scripture. As a college we’re interested in seeing our part in the bigger story. Our relationships can so often be tainted by the Fall. How can we be intentional about seeking Christ-centered renewal, not just on campus, but in every area of life? How do we help students see and appreciate the beauty of diversity?”

**ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM**

This desire for renewal plays out in Dordt’s curriculum. The Core Program includes a variety of course options that speak to issues of race and ethnicity, including “Persons in Community: Vulnerable Populations,” “Justice and Stewardship: Sociology and Social Justice,” and “Cross-Cultural Studies.”

Professor Dr. Barb Hoekstra teaches an education class called “Learner Differences,” using the book *Uncommon Decency* by Richard Mouw, a leading theologian, the former president of Fuller Theological Seminary, and a current Dordt College board member.

“Mouw gives us a Christian perspective on civility—on holding your convictions, your faith, while also caring for people and being civil toward them,” Hoekstra says. “Every semester my students say, ‘This book was so good. Use it again.’”

Over the course of the semester, students work through difficult questions such as: *What does white privilege mean? Who uses it and why? How should we think about affirmative action policies in the workplace and society?*

“Students want a safe place to ask their questions about diversity, about race,” Hoekstra says. “That’s what I try to make that class be.”

Professor Tara Boer, who teaches a social work course called “Diversity and Inequality,” says studying diversity in a relatively homogenous community can
be challenging. It is difficult to have meaningful conversations about race when people from different cultural backgrounds aren't represented or when one person is asked to speak on behalf of an entire group of people.

To compensate for that, Boer brings in students from previous classes who can articulate their experiences as members of a minority community. This helps to create diversity of thought and empathy about how people experience life differently.

As with many other thorny issues in contemporary society, racial injustice does not usually have an immediate and obvious solution. Often, the most important action may simply be to listen to one another. "We grow when we take time to hear other people's stories," Boer says. "To give them a space where they can be heard. That's the way Jesus intended it: for us to be in relationships, to hear stories, to relate and connect."

"One of my primary objectives is to create a culture of civility and respect," Boer says. "I'm less concerned that they know the answer than that they practice the skill of having respectful conversations that honor God and honor each other as human beings. That's where change happens."

To that end, Boer focuses on communication in her class—how to create conversations between people that help them understand one another. She teaches her students how to demonstrate their desire to understand, to be honest, and to be open to hearing about the experiences of other students without being defensive. In one project, she has her students sit down several times with someone they wouldn't normally have a conversation with—someone of a different race, ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic status. They practice speaking and listening with understanding and respect.

"It's a daunting task," Boer admits, "to think about how we prepare students for this world. If we are to be the vehicles of reconciliation in the world, we have to train them now—because they're going to be in it pretty soon."

Kylie Van Roekel and Jake Thayer, both seniors at Dordt, have grown through their experiences in these classes. "I come from a fairly non-diverse background," says Thayer. "So my personal opinion would be, 'I'm not racist.' But being colorblind is just as bad as being racist—not being able to recognize and appreciate different cultures."

"I've never had to think about these topics before," Van Roekel says. "The racial assumptions we might have, that we don't know that we have. And by not taking a stance as a Christian, am I advocating for something that I don't want to be behind?"

"As college students, we want it to be clear cut," Thayer adds. "Right and wrong, easy answer. But there isn't an easy answer to this problem."

Nick Payton, a senior on Dordt's football team, is a student of color at this predominantly white—though increasingly diverse—institution. "Coming from a diverse city, it took some time to adjust. Being black, I've had a different viewpoint my whole life because of how I was taught and the experiences I've had."

Payton says that during his sophomore year, he and another African-American teammate were told by a female student that she wouldn't date a black man because she didn't think he would make a good father. This comment wounded Payton and his friend. But rather than react in anger, they explained to her why such a stereotype was uncharitable. "We couldn't fault her for speaking the way she did, because that's how she had been taught," Payton says. "But we did have a responsibility to educate her."

Payton noted that the faculty has been a valuable resource to him. "We talked to Dr. Hoekstra, and she has done a fantastic job of listening to us." He adds, "Dordt College is a great place to learn and grow. And it's important to realize that I have the ability to educate people from the knowledge I have gained—to change negativity, to stand up to injustice, and to build a community not just of one mindset, but of diverse perspectives."

Vanoy Harris, who also plays football, suggested that Dordt might increase its diversity by recruiting more minority students. "The only black students here are for football or maybe soccer," he remarks. "But I think there have been attempts to open the conversation. The biggest thing is changing the mindset of people—why should they even care, when it doesn't affect them in this area of the country?"

"Try to put yourself in others' shoes," Harris encourages his fellow students. "The only wrong way to look at it is thinking your answer is the only right answer. Try to hear people out."

### REACHING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

As with all good teaching, the goal of teaching about diversity is that the conversation does not end when the bell rings. Many faculty members at Dordt have been creating and encouraging discussions about diversity.
outside the classroom. And there has been a groundswell of interest in such conversations.

Boer and Hoekstra, along with Dordt Communication Professor Dr. Bruce Kuiper and Graduate Assistant Paul Carter, led a summer research project that involved hosting dinners for students who identify as minorities and learning about their experiences at Dordt. The group plans to host a panel discussion to disseminate information to the faculty, so that they can better understand the experiences of minority students.

Baart recently led a chapel in which minority students shared their own experiences in front of their fellow students. They wrote a page on “what it feels like to be me.” Baart noted that it must have been terrifying for some of these students—not just the public speaking, but honestly sharing their experiences. But the students listening, as well as those speaking, were gracious to each other. “It’s the beauty of learning from the other,” says Baart, “that challenges the unquestioned presuppositions that we all have.”

Last fall, Dordt College hosted an informal weekly book discussion on Ta-Nehisi Coates’ recent book, Between the World and Me. Coates writes his book as a letter to his young son, and reflects on the particular systemic injustices that his son will have to face as a black man. He was inspired by James Baldwin’s powerful book The Fire Next Time.

Howard Schaap, who teaches in the English Department, spearheaded the book club.

“I read the book over the summer,” says Schaap, “and I thought, ‘This is something that’s so pertinent.’ This was the summer of Alton Sterling, of Michael Brown, of Philando Castile. “We have to deal with this with students, because it’s history as it happens.”

Schaap wanted to have discussions that were interdisciplinary, that extended beyond the classroom and connected to real-world events. The feedback was very positive. “One of the markers for me of success was that the conversation never died out. There was a lot of energy to it.”

Other ideas for thinking together about diversity are in the works, including a spring-semester film series, which provides students the chance to consider these issues in a different medium. The line-up includes Loving, Do the Right Thing, and Nate Parker’s The Birth of Nation.

“Even though we’re in Northwest Iowa, it’s a connected world,” says Schaap. “To pretend that these things are far away is not helpful. It’s a disservice to students.”

At the end of his visit to Dordt, Jemar Tisby reflected on his experience. “There is a willingness and an openness to learn more,” he said. “But for many of the students with whom I’ve interacted, they’re at the beginning of that journey. And so the task for many students is to take initiative to build their awareness, since it won’t happen by itself.”

Tisby went on: “What unites us, the Holy Spirit, is stronger than anything that could divide us. And if we are now brothers and sisters in the household of God, then we ought to learn each other’s perspectives, experiences, and burdens. We must learn to weep with those who weep—in particular those who have experienced marginalization. Racial divisions have been part of the church in America for so long that to bring the topic up automatically evokes strong and negative responses. But we are still required to speak the truth in love.”

By God’s grace, Schaap hopes, Dordt’s campuswide conversation about race will not die out: faculty and staff committed to training up the next generation will teach their students to listen to the stories of others, and students will take up for themselves the reconciling work of Christ’s kingdom.

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