

# Report on the Racial Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Series

Presented to UPC Session July 11, 2018

The Social Witness Committee at University Presbyterian Church (UPC) was created in the fall of 2016. The purpose of the Social Witness Committee is to awaken the theological conscience of the members of UPC by exploring tough societal topics and issues through the lens of our Christian faith and considering how we are called to respond to these issues as individuals and as a community of faith. After studying issues surrounding immigration during its first year, the committee decided to tackle the tough issue of race/racism for the 2017-2018 program year.

Current active members of the Social Witness committee are Pam Brubaker, Suzanna Caballero, Robin Dennis, Mary Dodd, Eve Lawrence, Krystal Leedy (staff resource), Kate Norman, Roscoe Overton, David Perry, and Marvin Wofford.

## Studying the Topic of Race/Racism

The committee began discussing what topic or topics to address for 2017-2018 at our August, 2017 meeting. We opened discussion to a variety of possible topics, and it soon became clear that the issues surrounding race were high on the list. Given that the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) had encouraged congregations to undertake a study of the book *Waking Up White* by Debby Irving, the committee began thinking of other areas relating to this topic, and how we might address a range of these issues. The local and national press had been reporting on many issues regarding race: Ferguson, Cleveland, Charleston, Baltimore, New York City, Charlottesville, Dallas, Falcon Heights, Black Lives Matter, “Good people”, “Those countries.” We knew these words conjured up different feelings and responses from people in our church, our community, and our nation. Were these matters of race, or more importantly, of racism? The Committee finally decided on a lengthy series to be titled Racial Truth, Justice and Reconciliation. We discussed ways to address the topic, but finally decided to seek a partnership with the Adult Christian Formation committee to present a series during the Sunday school hour for nine weeks, beginning the last 2 weeks of February and running through the last week of April. We met with members of the Christian Formation committee and developed a calendar and list of potential topics and speakers, which turned out to be the following:

February 18, 25, and March 4: Krystal Leedy led the discussion of the book *Waking Up White*.

March 11 – Informal class to reflect on issues raised during the previous three weeks

March 18 – Stephanie Hawley, Associate Vice President of Equity and Inclusion, Austin Community College, spoke on “Strength to Love: Race, Racism and Grace”.

March 25 – Carolyn Helsel of Austin Seminary (APTS) led the class, using her newly released book *Anxious To Talk About It, Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully About Racism*.

April 1 – Easter Sunday, no class.

April 8 – Pam Brubaker, member of Social Witness Committee, discussed “Undoing Institutional Racism: The Poor People’s Campaign”.

April 15 – Asante Todd, APTS professor, spoke on Black Lives Matter and theology in the public square.

April 22 – Mo Ranch weekend, no formal class was held this Sunday.

April 29 – Margaret Aymer, APTS Professor, talked about “Raising White Kids in a Racialized Society”.

## **Sharing information with the Congregation**

The series of classes held on Sunday mornings attracted an overwhelming audience averaging over 60 participants each Sunday. In fact, there were over 80 who attended the sessions presented by Krystal Leedy.

Most of the classes were presented in a format where the speaker presented their topic, followed by smaller group sessions (usually 6 to 8 people per group), where issues were discussed and people were openly able to express their own feelings, even feelings of acknowledging racist ideas and actions in our own past. In addition, we confronted issues regarding white supremacy and white privilege that many had not thought much about prior to this series.

We discussed the concept of race and what it means. While “race” is a word that we use throughout our daily lives, it was pointed out in Debby Irving’s book that the term race is really not based on science. In fact, in a recent article on race in National Geographic, it states the following: “Indeed, when scientists set out to assemble the first complete human genome, which was a composite of several individuals, they deliberately gathered samples from people who self-identified as members of different races. In June 2000, when the results were announced at a White House ceremony, Craig Venter, a pioneer of DNA sequencing, observed, ‘The concept of race has no genetic or scientific basis.’”

Regardless of there being no scientific basis for race, it is a concept that is ingrained in our culture, our politics, our neighborhoods, our educational opportunities, and many other aspects of our everyday lives. To the extent possible, we believe that racism should be addressed as the sin it is, and work toward expunging it from our national fabric. The committee has no formal policy recommendations to make to the Session of UPC, but we do have some recommendations for continued work by the church and our congregation.

## **The Basis for the Committee's Recommendations**

### **1. Scriptural**

The Bible has many scriptures addressing issues regarding race, while seldom actually using the word. Among these scriptures are the following:

#### **Deuteronomy 10:17-19 NIV**

17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. 18 He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. 19 And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

#### **1 Corinthians 12:13 NIV**

13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

#### **Revelation 7:9-10 NIV**

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

#### **Galatians 3:28 NIV**

28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

### **2. Denominational**

The PCUSA has an entire section of their website titled Facing Racism: A Vision of the Intercultural Community Church wide Anti-Racism Policy. It states right up front: "Racism is the opposite of what God intends for humanity. It is the rejection of the other, which is entirely contrary to the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. Racism is a lie about our fellow human beings, for it says that some are less than others. Because of our biblical understanding of who God is and what God intends for humanity, the PC(USA) must stand against, speak against and work against racism." There follows many links to resources for addressing and studying this issue. (<https://facing-racism.pcusa.org/>)

A portion of section F-1.0403 (Unity in Diversity) of the PCUSA Book of Order reads, "The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church's membership. In Christ, by the

power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability, geography, or theological conviction. There is therefore no place in the life of the Church for discrimination against any person. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership. No member shall be denied participation or representation for any reason other than those stated in this Constitution.”

### **3. Ecumenical/Faith-Based**

The issues concerning race and racism in Austin have been discussed and reported frequently in the press. The Texas Tribune reported in 2014 that “Among large, fast-growing cities, Austin is the only one with a shrinking African-American population, according to a report from the University of Texas at Austin.”

The spring of 2018 saw the issue of race and how it is reported based on a serial bomber whose work killed two African Americans and seriously injured another, along with an elderly Hispanic woman and two white young adults.

There have been a number of instances here in Austin of police injuring or killing individuals from racial minority groups.

Faith-based groups have protested local issues of racism, and have tried to create educational opportunities to address racism in Austin. UPC’s series on Racial Truth, Justice and Reconciliation was one of many such opportunities in Austin this spring.

### **4. Congregational**

All told, there were probably more than one hundred UPC members who attended one or more of the nine sessions at Sunday school. At the end, they were given the opportunity to express any thoughts or recommendations that they would like the Session to know. Among these are the following:

- Please compile a list of resources for those who were unable to attend.
- We need to continue to be aware of and support organizations and movements that fight racism.
- This was a series that should have been done years ago. Nine weeks was not sufficient. The series needs to be followed up in the pulpit.
- We need to continue the conversation about what we “DO” differently.
- Would like to know more about Black Lives Matter.
- I would like UPC to be intentional and choose to think about racism every day and feel we can make a difference.
- Is it possible that UPC might partner with a predominantly Black church in some way? Social action, speakers, music?
- This was the best church series I’ve ever attended. Thanks.
- Thank you all for this series and for your work to help us keep our eyes, ears and hearts on Social Witness. Much gratitude.
- Could we have a Sunday school class for children/young adults with racism as an issue?
- Maybe an anti-racism banner similar to the Say No to Anti Muslim Bigotry banner we now have.

- Periodically, have the congregation say parts of the Belhar Confession during the Time of Confession during church service.
- Acquire a collection of children's books for the UPC library about this topic. Also, a collection of books used in the series would be nice to have in the adult UPC library.
- Include a relevant movie on this topic in a future Supper and Substance series.

The committee met and reviewed the series and suggestions, and added a few others:

- Thinking about the issue of reparations, at our request the Historical Heritage Committee is investigating how UPC came to own the land we currently occupy.
- Begin a conversation about what it is like to Wake Up Black.
- Remind the congregation and the Session about the resolution passed by UPC in 2008 declaring UPC to be a Multicultural Church. The committee is in conversation with Wesley United Methodist Church, a predominately African-American church, concerning plans to potentially include a service on the Martin Luther King birthday Sunday.
- Work with the UKirk committee to start a recurring storytelling event that gives people the opportunity to share stories of racial discrimination and reconciliation at the University of Texas.

## **Specific Recommendations**

The Social Witness committee wishes to have the Session receive this report and publish it on the UPC website and in at least two of the weekly UPC Update emails.

We would like to endorse the recommendations made above from both the congregation at large and from the committee. The committee will fulfill the recommendations of placing the books used in the series in the UPC library. We urge the members of the Session to read the recommendations and consider them whenever possible in the various committees of the church.

As to the specific recommendation regarding the resolution of UPC being a Multicultural Church, the committee recommends that the Session read

"A Resolution to Affirm University Presbyterian Church as a Multicultural Church" (Appendix) and resolve to continue the process of being a willing and accepting Multicultural Church.

**Respectfully submitted, July 11, 2018 by**

**The Social Witness Committee of University Presbyterian Church**

**Chairperson, Mary Dodd**

**Previous Chairperson, Marvin Wofford**

To read "A Resolution to Affirm University Presbyterian Church as a Multicultural Church, go to [upcaustin.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/MulticulturalAffirmation.pdf](http://upcaustin.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/MulticulturalAffirmation.pdf)