

A Word from our General Presbyter

Ed Thompson

Let me recommend a book. Actually, the book was first recommended to me and to all of us who are Presbyterian by the co-moderators of our General Assembly, Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston. I guess that happened early on, following their election at Portland in 2016. It's possible we were caught up in responding to the floods, but I'm not sure how many of us noticed that or did anything about it.

Anyway, the book is called Waking Up White, and it's written by Debby Irving. I think I first heard about it at the Fall Polity Conference last year. I attended a workshop on the book, where it was suggested that you could study it with your session or your church staff. While I had led several book studies during session meetings when I was at McKinnon, I had never been part of a book study while being on presbytery staff. That changed this year, however, as we've been using it at our staff meetings, and it has generated some good discussion.

The book chronicles Debby Irving's growing awareness of race and how that has impacted – and impacts – her life. Although we are different genders and grew up in different parts of the country and I am probably about ten years older than she is, her experience mirrors my own. I went to an all-white high school and attended an all-white church. Well, there was one year when we had an African pastor on our church staff. As best I can figure out, he must have been some kind of student intern from Pittsburgh Seminary. I remember how proud we all were that he was a part of our church. Yet even as a preteen that struck me as odd because while we appreciated him and celebrated the fact that we were willing to have an African pastor, we generally ignored the African-Americans in our own hometown, unless of course, they were good at sports.

Waking Up White is not linear, although it is a generally autobiographical book. Irving jumps around to different parts of her life. She is refreshingly honest about her naiveté, about the mistakes she's made along the way and about how her good intentions don't excuse some of the things she's said and done. She doesn't really tell you what to do, but she talks about what's learned and she emphasizes our need to be aware of how racism has shaped our lives and the life of our nation.

It's becoming harder and harder to ignore racism, although I'm sure some still do. The events in Charlottesville earlier this month. The shootings at the Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina last year. The death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri back in 2014. Those are the things that come to mind. Unfortunately, they only scratch the surface. There is a steady drum beat of events that remind us of the reality of racism, and there's no reason to think it's going to stop. Whites have the opportunity to ignore all this, but perhaps we do so at the cost of our souls.

I encourage you to read this book. Better yet, get someone else to read it and talk about it with you. Study it with your session or in an adult Sunday School class. It's an easy read, although it doesn't provide easy answers. Maybe more important than the insights it provides is the discussion it provokes. Thanks to our co-moderators for bringing this book to our attention and for encouraging/challenging us to read it and to talk about the racism that is killing us.