

Donna Grethen

ZOOMING IN ON RELATIONSHIPS AND SHARED LEARNING

PW's Racial Equity Committee Book Discussion

BY JO ANN BURRELL AND
JOY DURRANT

In September 2018, we became the new cochairs of PW Churchwide's Racial Equity Committee (REC), formerly, the Antiracism Committee. We decided to begin by changing the format and composition of the committee. The Antiracism Committee had been composed of individuals who had experience with antiracism and experience with PW at the national level. For REC, we tried a new approach—everyone on the Board would serve at least one year. This way, Presbyterian Women from across the country would gain experience with antiracism. And all of those individuals could take back to their synods or constituencies what they learned and replicate or adapt the model locally.

Since everyone was new to the committee, we sought a way to bind us together to allow for open and honest conversation of difficult topics. We zeroed in on the idea of an electronic book

club. We discussed numerous books and decided to read *Anxious to Talk About It: Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully About Race* by Carolyn B. Helsel (St. Louis: Chalice, 2017). We met every two weeks by video conference (Zoom), discussing one chapter of the book at each meeting. Since the coronavirus outbreak, many of us have become acquainted with (and even appreciative of!) what Zoom makes possible. At the time, however, Zoom was still very much an experiment!

We began our journey together on a wing and prayer—not knowing what to expect, but knowing we could rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Sharing Truths

Our book group was racially diverse. Despite that the author geared the book toward conversations among white Christians, everyone agreed that there was a good deal to learn from the book, especially since we were discussing it together. As the author suggested, week after week, we shared our stories, prompted by scripture and various topics including forgiveness, confession, early memories and more. In doing so, we found ourselves knitted together and growing in our ability to empathize with and learn from experiences unlike our own.

Some of the stories and thoughts that were shared included:

- ✦ Forgiveness includes the ability to hang in there until I understand better.
- ✦ In the moment, I might be not be able to forgive, but with time, it's possible.





- ✦ When I was growing up, race was never mentioned in my house. I was seven when I was called the N-word. I didn't know what it meant so I asked my parents. My family was mixed, so I was always around a lot of different races.
- ✦ I remember Gospel stories being told in colors. I always wondered why sin was associated with the color black.
- ✦ I remember water fountains labeled "colored" and "white," sitting in the back of the bus, and not being able to buy a hotdog at Kress's.
- ✦ I remember a black girl trying out for *The Sound of Music* and being denied the role of Maria; she was told "We want to keep it traditional."
- ✦ My family moved my senior year of high school to a much smaller city. The former white and black schools had been closed and a new high school had just opened, merging students and teachers. I was a band kid and observed the different marching styles of the student groups. I felt it unfair that the spirit and flare of the black band students were not honored because the white band director insisted on a rigid military style of marching.
- ✦ When I was eight years old, I stole a candy bar from a store and

confessed to my mother when I got home. When I was 16, I repaid the store, plus interest.

- ✦ Why are we not afraid of whites who are responsible for most of the mass shootings in the U.S.? Why is there an assumption that people of color do the terrible things? It's because they are arrested in higher numbers.
- ✦ Being heard is important, even if the listener just says, "I'm so sorry that happened."
- ✦ I was in seventh grade when busing started in my city. Until recently, I had never heard non-whites share their experiences about being bused.
- ✦ I grew up on military bases around the U.S. and the world. When my family was assigned to Norfolk, half of the students at my school were black, and half were white.
- ✦ It's important to speak up when you perceive someone is being slighted.
- ✦ Our churches don't talk about racism as much as they should.
- ✦ How do we handle fear? How do we get through those negative images we may unknowingly have

of others? How do we get fear to move away and how do we get to know someone better—for who they are and not who we *think* they are?

- ✦ It's painful for sisters of color to share their stories of racism.
- ✦ White people have work to do and we must do it. We should not ask people of color to lead us or to be our conscience.
- ✦ It's hard to deal with deniers and accusers who say these matters shouldn't be brought up. I'm still hurting, but I rejoice that we can talk about it, which I thought I would never see in my lifetime. It's inspiring that people are willing to have these conversations.
- ✦ I'm grateful that God is God and that through God's grace, we have the opportunity to engage the issues and try to intervene and disrupt the system. Only through God is that possible.
- ✦ I am confident in knowing that God has the plan laid out. God has designated the work we are to do. I am to trust and to do my part.

We were delighted that PW staff members joined us for the book club. Some of them had known each other for decades. They shared that they had never had the in-depth, personal discussions like those that developed over the weeks of our book study.

REVELATION 21:1–6A REMINDS US OF NEW BEGINNINGS THROUGH THE POWER AND GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. WE STEPPED OUT IN PRAYER AND MADE MAGNIFICENT MUSIC TOGETHER, BUILDING ONE NOTE UPON ANOTHER AT EACH MEETING. WE LEARNED TO LISTEN TO GOD, WHO GUIDED US INTO LISTENING TO EACH OTHER.

The Racial Equity Committee ventured out in a new direction when we decided to do this book group. We were unsure about holding so many meetings by Zoom, unsure that the book would be the right fit, unsure that book discussion held on line could bring near-strangers together enough to lay a foundation for additional meaningful discussions. And yet, we grew together.

Revelation 21:1–6a reminds us of new beginnings through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We stepped out in prayer and made magnificent music together, building one

note upon another at each meeting. We learned to listen to God, who guided us into listening to each other. Bridges of friendship, love and caring were developed. Our differences didn't divide us, but showed us the amazing diversity of God's creation. Now we recognize our similarities and see each other as children of God. We hope that our experience of reaching out to others will be duplicated by others (perhaps through a book discussion), and the walls of differences or fears will fall.

Each of us was so grateful for every member of our book club. After com-

pleting the study, several of the book club members were led to write about their thoughts on racism; the titles included: "Decentering Whiteness in a Multicultural Society;" "Anxious NOT to Talk About It;" "Reflections;" "Chicanery;" "Waking Up in Canada;" and "Wrestling with My Complicity in Racism." Read these reflections at www.presbyterian-women.org/stories. 🍷

Jo Ann Burrell and Joy Durrant are vice moderators for Presbyterian Women churchwide.

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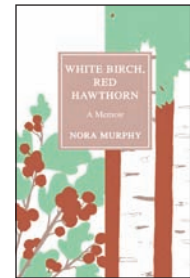
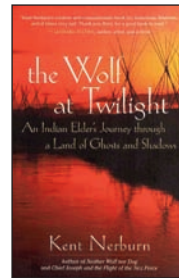
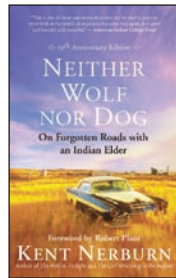
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DRAWN TOGETHER THROUGH A SYNOD BOOK STUDY

BY MARILYN STONE



As a way of continuing to expand our understanding of Native American culture and the racism specific to Native American tribes within our synod, PW in the Synod of Lakes and Prairies initiated a book study in January 2019. Our synod is unique as it includes Dakota Presbytery, a non-geographic presbytery consisting of 21 Native Presbyterian churches. Our PW in the Synod (PWS) Coordinating Team (CT) is intentional in walking with our Dakota Presbytery sisters—listening, learning and growing in our relationships and partnerships. The book study provides a way for Presbyterian Women across the synod to deepen their understanding and build relationships.

In 2019, we read Kent Nerburn's books, *Neither Wolf Nor Dog*, *The Wolf at Twilight*, and *The Girl Who Sang to the Buffalo*. Currently, we are reading *White Birch, Red Hawthorn* by Nora Murphy. Difficult and painful topics are explored, including misrepresentation of Native Americans in history and literature, including children's literature.

Elizabeth "Betty" Sandy, Presbytery of Des Moines, says, "The book study has been a refreshing joy in meeting women of faith I would not have met otherwise. Our prayers and discussion have been so deeply spiritual and personal. I feel like the distance between us and our cultures have melted away. . . we have built genuine awareness of the other and common ground. And Zoom has been so easy to access!"

Lana Schultz, PWP Northern Plains moderator, says, "I am convinced from the book studies that this country would be better served if everyone spent more time practicing spirituality, as the Native American culture does, than talking about it. Our past and present history would look much different."

The book study meets every two weeks via Zoom, and participants have a choice between afternoon or evening sessions. At least nine presbyteries have been represented through the various discussions.

Participation of sisters from Dakota Presbytery has enriched the discussion and our understanding of what we read.

Not only has learning taken place and personal experiences shared, friendships have developed over the miles, with no need for concern about weather conditions! The afternoon and evening sessions have provided flexibility to meet personal schedules, and meeting via Zoom permits participation via a tablet/laptop or phone. What started out as an experiment has turned into a year-round opportunity with increasing interest.

Marilyn Stone is the synod representative from the Synod of Lakes and Prairies on PW's national board.

Annabelle Wells, PWP Central Nebraska moderator shares her "Top 10" reasons for appreciating the book study coordinated by PW in the Synod of Lakes and Prairies.

1. Synod wide
2. New friends
3. Old friends
4. No driving necessary
5. Low cost—only need a book (which can be borrowed from a library) and a phone or device connected to the internet
6. No danger of contracting the coronavirus
7. Exchange ideas
8. Promote new ideas and food for thought
9. New understanding of racism and its impact on our history
10. Lifelong learning