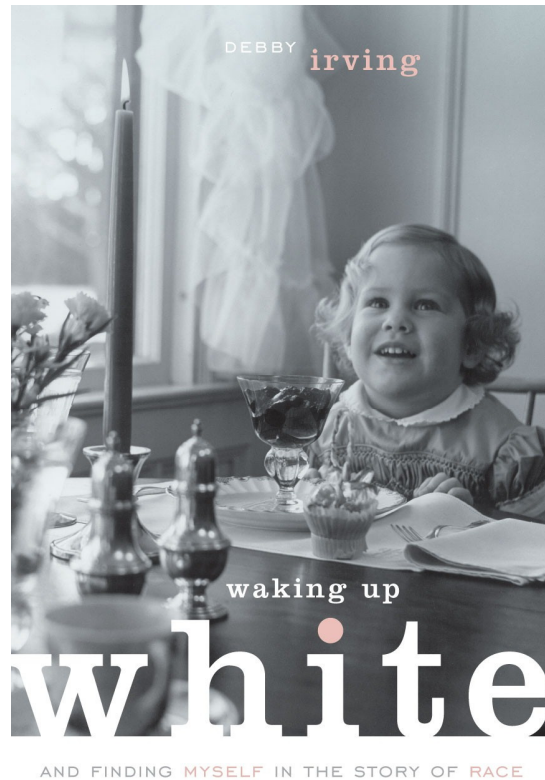


Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race

By Debbie Irving



*A Study Guide from
The Reverends Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston*

Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race

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Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race A Study Guide



The Reverends Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston

Introduction

The Reverend Denise Anderson and the Reverend Jan Edmiston, Co-Moderators of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), have invited the church to read and discuss the book, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, by Debby Irving. This resource is designed to help groups respond to that invitation.

About this study

“We need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable.” Believe it or not, this was really good news to me when I heard it at the end of my first anti-racism training session. What I understood in a second was that it is okay to be uncomfortable. I heard this in a room full of brown, black, and white people, all with different experiences, all wanting God’s justice to be made real, all committed to loving one another. Thinking about racism in such a setting made me mighty uncomfortable, just as reading this book did. There are two wonderful gifts from this experience, though: when we pay attention to our discomfort, we can learn and change and love each other better, and we are all always (always, always, always!) held in the grace of Christ.

Here’s the thing: Being uncomfortable isn’t the only thing going on when reflecting on the stories in this book. What you’ll find by using the questions below is that your life is much richer than you thought, it’s more vibrant, and you have way more resources than you thought you did for understanding what’s going on with racism in our country. Learning about how to interrupt racism is part of learning how to be a disciple of Christ. We’re learning how to love God and love others as ourselves.

Tips for facilitators

You can be mindful about a couple of things that will help your study go well.

Identify in advance how much time the group will devote to each session. This will shape how you approach the discussion: how you structure the time and how you use the questions.

Invite the participants to read *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* before the study starts. It may be purchased at your local independent bookstore or ordered through Amazon.com.

If possible, inform the participants that the first session will focus on our understanding of who we are in relation to race.

Practice listening

- Pray: Open with prayer and close with prayer. A litany has been included in Appendix B that can be shared with group members to use for their personal devotion. It may also be used as the closing prayer for the study. While praying, remember to include times of silence in order to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you.
- Keep eye contact: It's hard to maintain eye contact when we're uncomfortable with ourselves or others. When someone is speaking, maintain kind eye contact with that person. This will help build relationships and create safe space for people to struggle.
- Pay attention: A pastor I knew used to say "some people are hard of hearing, but some people are hard of listening." Sometimes we listen in order to say something back or have our chance at talking. Instead, pay attention to what the person speaking is offering from his or her heart and mind.
- Keep a notebook or journal: (1) Record questions, observations, or insights for your own reflection; (2) Invite others to keep a notebook or journal; (3) Try keeping a notebook for the group to record questions, observations, or insights week to week.

Practice creative flexibility

- Take the temperature of the room: In other words, see what the group as a whole is thinking about or asking. One way to do this is to repeat back what you're hearing. "What I'm hearing is this: _____." If the group is approaching the study a particular way, you can help them out. Maybe two smaller groups are better than a large group, maybe you need to start with a Bible study, maybe you need to meet in each other's homes, or maybe you need to meet around a meal. Maybe you want to throw out all the questions here and come up with your own!
- Take the lead and get feedback: It's great when someone can start out with the study and even better when the leader gets feedback from others about how to do the study. If you consult with a couple of other folks, the leadership and support of the group will be easier. Use the elements of the study as they are, redesign them, or do something completely new.
- Keep a box, basket, or bag of basic supplies: If you have the budget for it, keep small notebooks, pens, pencils, and even crayons or markers for people who learn with doodling.

Practice "truth in love"

- Truth and love need to go together for us to build each other up. In a study like this, that means being frank about our privilege and racism, but not judgmental of ourselves or each other.

Practice relationship building

- Consider setting your group size to be about 12–15 people. This is large enough to have good questions and a variety of stories to learn from, and small enough to build relationships as you go through the study. If time allows, you might add a relationship building activity at the beginning of each session. [Here are some exercises you can use or adapt.](#)

Practice partnership

- Strive to ensure that each person has the opportunity to speak.
- Make sure each person has the right to pass and not to speak if the person chooses.
- Mutual Invitation is a process for discussion designed to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak. It proceeds in the following way:

The leader or a designated person shares first. After that person has spoken, she or he invites by name another person to share. This does not need to be the person beside the speaker. The person who has been invited has two options:

- (a) to speak and then invite the next speaker;
- (b) to pass and then invite the next speaker.

The process continues until everyone has been invited. If participants passed, be sure to extend them another invitation.

Mutual Invitation was by Eric H. F. Law and described in *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*: St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993


Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and are copyrighted © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and are used by permission.

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Session One—Beginning your racial autobiography

Goal of the session—To reflect upon who we are in relation to race.


A reading from scripture—Ephesians 4:11–16


 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

A selection from the Confession of Belhar 

 “We believe ... that that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain” (*Book of Confessions*, Confession of Belhar, 10.3)

Quotations from *Waking Up White*


 “Waking up white has been an unexpected journey that’s required me to dig back into childhood memories to recall when, how, and why I developed such distorted ideas about race, racism, and the dominant culture in which I soaked” (Debby Irving, *Waking Up White, and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, Cambridge, MA: Elephant Room Press, 2014, p. xii).


 As I unpack my own white experience in the pages ahead, I have no pretense that I speak for all white Americans, not even my four white siblings. Never before have I been so keenly aware of how individual our cultural experiences are. That said, all Americans live within the context of one dominant culture, the one brought to this country by white Anglo settlers. Exploring one’s relationship to that culture is where the waking-up process begins” (*Waking Up White*, p. xiii).

Opening prayer


 Open the session with prayer.

Welcome and introduction

 Welcome the participants.


 Briefly describe the study using these or similar words:


- *In response to an invitation from the Co-Moderators of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we will discuss some of the themes raised in the book, Waking Up White, and Finding Myself in the Story of Race, by Debby Irving. This will be a time of respectful conversation in which we will listen to one another as we share our experiences and understandings.*

 It may be helpful to establish some simple ground rules to guide the conversations. The group may be invited to identify ground rules. The following are common ground rules that could be used or adapted by the group.

- Take responsibility for what we say. Use “I” statements.
- Think carefully and prayerfully before we speak.
- Treat each other respectfully.
- Listen to understand not to debate.
- Ask for clarification when necessary, in an effort to understand one another.
- It is always okay to pass. We don’t have to respond to every question.
- Maintain confidentiality. What is said in the study group stays in the study group.


Discussion

 Read, or invite a participant to read, the scripture passage, the selection from the Confession of Belhar, and the quotes from *Waking Up White*.

 Invite the participants to discuss the following questions. The questions may be taken one at a time or time may be allowed for the participants to write their reflections on all the questions and then discuss what they have written in response to the questions.


- What is your racial heritage?
- Growing up, what kind of contact did you have with people from different racial backgrounds?
- What are your first memories of white people being treated differently than people of color? What are your first memories of people of color being treated differently than white people? Recall specific incidents if you can. How did you feel?
- How did important adults (e.g. family, teachers, ministers) and your faith community help you understand and interpret your experiences with racial groups different from your own? What did they tell you about specific groups?


Closing questions


 Invite the participants to reflect on the following questions. If participants do not have answers to these questions, invite them to consider the questions between the end of this session and the next session.

- What did you learn about yourself?
- What will you do with what you learned?

Closing prayer

 Thank the participants.


 Note that the next session will focus on our understanding of race.

 Close with prayer.


Session Two—What is race?

Goal of the session—To reflect upon our understanding of race.


A reading from scripture—Romans 12:3–8


 “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”

A selection from the Confession of Belhar 

 “We believe ... that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God” (*Book of Confessions, Confession of Belhar, 10.3*)

Quotations from *Waking Up White*

 “No one argues that human beings don’t come in different packaging. Anyone can see that skin color, eye shape, and hair texture look different among various populations. Yet whereas scientists were once limited to measuring skulls and studying nose shape to try to understand the differences, they can now collect, study, and compare blood and DNA sequences. No science supports the idea that genetic makeup follows the neat racial lines white people have created. No science links race to intrinsic traits such as intelligence or musical or physical abilities.” (*Waking Up White, p. 39*)


 “The biggest problem with America’s idea of racial categories is that they’re not just categories: they’ve been used to imply a hierarchy born of nature. Regardless of how racial categories came into being, Americans have been cast in racial roles that have the power to become self-fulfilling, self-perpetuating prophecies.” (*Waking Up White p. 41*)

Opening prayer


 Open the session with prayer.


Discussion

 Briefly remind the participants of the ground rules.

 Invite the participants to discuss the following question:


- Because of our last session, what did you notice? What did you do?

 Read, or invite a participant to read, the scripture passage, the selection from the Confession of Belhar, and the quotes from *Waking Up White*.

 Invite the participants to discuss the following questions:


- Have you given much thought to the concept of race? Why or why not?
- How has your understanding of race changed over time?
- How have you experienced racial categories shifting through time? What names have been given to races at different points in your life? Why did this happen?
- How did you learn that race, not a biological reality but a social construct, created advantage for white people at the expense of people of color?


Closing questions


 Invite the participants to reflect on the following questions. If participants do not have answers to these questions, invite them to consider the questions between the end of this session and the next session.

- What did you learn about yourself?
- What will you do with what you learned?

Closing prayer

 Thank the participants.


 Note that the next session will focus on our understanding of racism.

 Close with prayer.


Session Three—What is racism?

Goal of the session—To reflect upon our understanding of racism.


A reading from scripture—John 17:20–23


 “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”


A selection from the Confession of Belhar 

 “We believe ... that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted” (*Book of Confessions, Confession of Belhar, 10.3*).

Quotations from *Waking Up White*

 “Racism wasn’t about this person or that, this upset or that, this community or that; racism is, and always has been, the way America has sorted and ranked its people in a bitterly divisive, humanity-robbing system.” (*Waking Up White, p. 31*)

 “Segregation enables avoidance, which enables denial, which creates the illusion that white privilege doesn’t exist. But just because I didn’t see my skin color advantage didn’t mean it didn’t exist. As a white person, I don’t have to do *anything* to have skin color advantages conferred on me without my permission, without my awareness. I can choose to write and speak against it, but at the end of the day, as long as our racial system is intact, there’s nothing I can do to give away my privilege. I’ve got it whether I want it or not. The question is what will I *do* with it.” (*Waking Up White, p. 74*)

 “Here’s one way I’ve come to think about it. Think about three basic elements:


- skin color symbolism: using skin color to imagine innate levels of intelligence, athleticism, aggression, and so forth in oneself and others
- favoritism: the idea that one is best
- power: the ability to make decisions for and/or distribute resources to people

skin color symbolism + favoritism + power = systemic racism.” (*Waking Up White, p. 54*)


Opening Prayer


 Open the session with prayer.

Discussion

 Invite the participants to discuss the following question:


- Because of our last session, what did you notice? What did you do?

 Read, or invite a participant to read, the scripture passage, the selection from the Confession of Belhar, and the quotes from *Waking Up White*.

 Invite the participants to discuss the following questions.


- How have you understood racism? How has that understanding changed over time?
- How does the definition, “skin color symbolism + favoritism + power = systemic racism” speak to you? Does it make sense? Why or why not?
- How does a systemic understanding of racism change the work we need to do?
- What concrete steps can we take to challenge and dismantle systemic racism?

Closing questions


 Invite the participants to reflect on the following questions. If participants do not have answers to these questions, invite them to consider the questions between the end of this session and the next session.

- What did you learn about yourself?
- What will you do with what you learned?

Closing prayer

 Thank the participants.


 Note that the next session will focus on next steps.

 Close with prayer.


Session Four—Where do we go from here?

Goal of the session—To identify next steps to take in understanding race and working to dismantle racism.


A reading from scripture—Amos 5:14–15; 23–24


 Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

A selection from the Confession of Belhar 

 “We believe ... that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (*Book of Confessions*, Confession of Belhar, 10.7).

Quotations from *Waking Up White*


 How can racism possibly be dismantled until white people, lots and lots of white people, understand it as an unfair system, get in touch with the subtle stories and stereotypes that play in their heads, and see themselves not as good or bad but as players in the system? Until white people embrace the problem, the elephant in the room—and all the nasty tension and mistrust that goes with it—will endure. And the feedback efforts of people of color will fall on ignorant ears at best, or be misconstrued as too whiney or too angry at worst.” (*Waking Up White*, p. 153)

 “Self-examination and the courage to admit bias and unhelpful inherited behaviors may be our greatest tools for change. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to expose our ignorance and insecurities takes courage. And love. I believe the most loving thing a person, or a group of people, can do for another is to examine the ways in which their own insecurities and assumptions interfere with others’ ability to thrive. Please join me in opening your heart and mind to the possibility that you—yes, even well-intentioned you—have room to change and grow, so that you can work with people of all colors and ethnicities to co-create communities that can unite, strengthen, and prosper.” (*Waking Up White*, p. 249)


Opening prayer


 Open the session with prayer.

Discussion


 Invite the participants to discuss the following question:

- Because of our last session, what did you notice? What did you do?

 Read, or invite a participant to read, the scripture passage, the selection from the Confession of Belhar, and the quotes from *Waking Up White*.


 Invite the participants to discuss the following questions:


- How often do you talk about race with your family and friends? Why do you think that is the case? What can you do to change?
- Think of a time when you were treated unfairly. What happened? How did you react emotionally and physically? How did you respond?
- Think of a time when you stood up for your rights or the rights of others. What did you do? Where did you get the strength or courage or grace to do what you did?
- What do you hear God calling you to change or to do through this study? What are your next steps to dismantle racism?

 If appropriate, discuss the following questions:

- What might the next steps be for our group, for our community?
- How will we determine, and take, those next steps? Make specific plans to do so.

Closing prayer

 Thank the participants.

 Close the session with the litany “Whose We Are and Who We Are” found in Appendix B or another prayer.

Appendix A

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Resources for Further Study

Facing Racism: A Vision of the Intercultural Community, approved by the 222nd General Assembly (2016), <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/facing-racism-vision-intercultural-community-churchwide-antiracism-policy/>.

Facing Racism: A Vision of the Intercultural Community Study Guides (Racial Ethnic & Women's Ministries) <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/facing-racism-vision-intercultural-community-antiracism-study-guides/>.

The Confession of Belhar (available in English, Korean and Spanish). <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/belhar-confession/>.

The Confession of Belhar (Being Reformed—Faith Seeking Understanding), Cynthia Holder Rich (Congregational Ministries Publishing). Leaders Guide, www.pcusastore.com/Products/680751/the-confession-of-belhar-leaders-guide.aspx; Participant's Book, www.pcusastore.com/Products/680752/the-confession-of-belhar-participants-book.aspx.

Race and Reconciliation: Workbook—Confessions of 1967 and Belhar (Being Reformed—Faith Seeking Understanding), Clifton Kirkpatrick (Congregational Ministries Publishing). www.pcusastore.com/Products/680854/race--reconciliation-the-confessions-of-1967-and-belhar-workbook.aspx

A Study of the Belhar Confession and Its Accompanying Letter, Eunice McGarrahan (Office of Theology and Worship), <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/belhar-confession-study-guide/>.

30 Days with the Belhar Confession (Presbyterian Peacemaking Program). Available at store.pcusa.org. PDS# 2435816004.

Living the Gospel of Peace: Tools for Building More Inclusive Community, Eric Law (Presbyterian Peacemaking Program). Available at store.pcusa.org. PDS# 702700414.

Facing Racism: In Search of the Beloved Community, Lonna Lee (Presbyterian Peacemaking Program). Available at store.pcusa.org. PDS# 7027098002.

Practicing God's Radical Hospitality: Exploring Difference, Change and Leadership through the Spiritual Discipline of Hospitality, Teresa Chávez Saucedo (Presbyterian Women). Available at store.pcusa.org. PDS# PWR13060.

Race in a Post-Obama America, edited by David Maxwell (Westminster John Knox Press). Available at thethoughtfulchristian.com.

Appendix B Whose We Are and Who We Are

A litany drawing on scripture, the *Book of Confessions*, and the *Book of Order*

God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female, God created them.ⁱ

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus said, "You have given the right answer. Do this, and you will live."ⁱⁱ

We believe in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.^{iv}

The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning for human life and for all things. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation.^v

The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.^{vi}

The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.^{vii}

The human tendency to idolatry and tyranny calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.^{viii}

God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker,^{ix}

the church is a witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.^x

God sends the church in the power of the Holy Spirit to share with Christ in establishing God's just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world. God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ is the ground of justice and peace.^{xi}

The church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.^{xii}

*In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,*

***to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, Come, Lord Jesus!^{xiii}***

ⁱ Genesis 1:26

ⁱⁱ Luke 10:27–28

ⁱⁱⁱ Confession of Belhar

^{iv} F-1.0301, The Church Is the Body of Christ

^v F-1.0301, The Church Is the Body of Christ

^{vi} F-1.0301, The Church Is the Body of Christ

^{vii} F-1.0301, The Church Is the Body of Christ

^{viii} F-2.05, The Confessions as Statements of the Faith of the Reformed Tradition, adapted slightly for use in this liturgy

^{ix} Confession of Belhar

^x Confession of Belhar

^{xi} W-7.4001 Reconciliation in Christ

^{xii} Confession of Belhar

^{xiii} *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Lines 65–76