Book Review – Living in Color, by Randy Woodley

 In one of our Classis discussions, during a presentation by Bernadette Arthur from Race Relations, I suggested a book resource called Living in Color. The author of that book is Randy Woodley and he is an Indigenous theologian, scholar and church ministry leader. He has a wealth of experience in pastoral ministry and gives others a picture of what racial reconciliation could look like. As a Keetoowah Cherokee member and someone who has studied biblical theology, Woodley helps the reader celebrate God’s beautiful plan to reveal Himself through every culture. I selected this as the NADC book recommendation, for the latest newsletter, but I wanted to give a bit longer book review of it here.

 Woodley starts the book in the most logical place for Christians, at creation, in the book of Genesis. The Creator made a world of immeasurable diversity and our natural world is still revealing new and diverse forms of life that have been previously undiscovered. Even in the things we know a lot about, we see complexity that suggests our Creator loves diversity, including human diversity. “He is a God of innovation and extravagance, diversity and lavishness. God is the artist who formed the planet Saturn and its beautiful surrounding rings. He is the humorist who formed the giraffe and the narwhale, the armadillo and the platypus.”

 As he shifts to discussing the human differences and cultural diversity, that should be celebrated, Woodley bookends the Bible by pointing out a powerful passage in Revelation 5:9-13. Every tribe and language, people and nation, each possess a unique understanding and gifting that God has placed within that culture. One day, they will all be together in perfect unity (not uniformity) worshiping Him together.

 Woodley also discusses the significance of cultural difference in our witness to those outside the Christian faith. He says it is the job of the Christian to relate to the culture of the unbeliever and references 1 Corinthians 9:22-23. This is calling our churches to be intentionally mindful of not creating a monoculturally comfortable environment in our congregations where we expect new people to come and be conformed to who we are.

 The reality of opposition to diversity exists all over the world and has manifested itself in many examples great and small. It ranges from individual racist attitudes, to wars of purification and genocide. In our North American colonial history, many Europeans thought they were doing the good work of God and bringing Christ to a people who did not know Him. The truth is that God was here before the colonizers came and, in God’s perfect triune unity, Christ was here too. Woodley tells stories of Indigenous prophets who communed with the Great Spirit and Creator and accurately predicted many things that followed the white man’s arrival. An Inuit man named Maniilaq told stories of his encounters with God where God told him He had sent a great light to the earth in the form of the Word, or Christ.

 As our multicultural nation learns to live together, we should strive for more than just acceptance. A deep appreciation of those who are different than us would convey an invitation to others that would say “our church is more bounteous because of your presence.” We need the gifts and perspectives of others and our churches need them too. God has created us with purpose and our relationship with Him, His creation and our fellow human beings all need to be in balance for us to flourish. That would be a more full picture of a biblical worldview.

 Woodley talks about some of the things that have broken this balance and they include bloodshed, sexual immorality, broken treaties and idolatry. He expands on each category and references Numbers 35:33, Leviticus 18:22-28, 2 Samuel 21:1-14 and Jeremiah 16:18 respectively. In this brokenness and pain, Woodley points out the importance of listening and waiting in the lament. We often want to move past the pain too quickly in our society and would be wiser to sit, listen, wait and let the voice of the oppressed come out in their own words and their own time. Sometimes, even in our own prayers we talk too much and fail to listen.

 Woodley’s writing has an eloquence and grace to it that makes it able to ask some tough questions, point out some challenging statements and cause the reader to reflect on their own story. In topics like idolatry (consumerism), he suggests that our dominant western society has tolerated sin and injustice for too long because we were the ones who were benefiting from it; or still are. Has our modern journey of reconciliation left out an important aspect of restitution? What would that look like in the case of Indigenous Peoples?

 Gifts of cultural diversity come with responsibility. A host can pass on these gifts to others but is also responsible to be in an equal relationship of power and mutual respect. Part of that responsibility is to have open hands to give that gift away, but also to be humble and ready to receive from the other as well. We must be in an, open, accepting and relational posture in order to be able to do this. God calls us to come to Him with open hearts and open hands, why would we think we should encounter each other any differently?

 These are just some of the themes and thoughts from Randy Woodley’s book and some of my reflections on them. He is also a wonderful storyteller, with many examples and stories woven into the pages of this book. If you are interested in exploring this topic for yourself or your church, I recommend Living in Color as one of the voices that is important to hear. I would even lend you my copy if you get in touch, yournadc@gmail.com.