



Intro: You're listening to Crossings Conversations from Church Divinity School of the Pacific, a show about leaders creating Christian community and sharing God's love.

Kyle Oliver: Hi this Kyle. Welcome Back. If this is your first time listening, I suggest you go back to episode one to hear the little spiel about what we're up to here, but the short version is that we are talking about leadership formation with some folks throughout the Episcopal Church who have a lot to say about that. In this episode we'll be talking to Bishop Deon Johnson of the Diocese of Missouri, and we had a great conversation, especially about how the pandemic is bringing out creativity and accelerating new ministry models. Hope you enjoy the show.

Oliver: This is Kyle Oliver, Communications and Marketing Manager at Church Divinity School of the Pacific, and I'm here with the Right Reverend Deon Johnson of the Diocese of Missouri. Bishop Deon, thanks so much for being with us.

Deon Johnson: Well, thank you for having me.

Kyle: This is a conversation about leadership formation from lots of different perspectives. I know that you've been a bishop for a relatively short time, so I encourage you to think about this question in whatever way makes sense, but in the time that you've been serving as a priest, as bishop how has your thinking about leadership formation changed?

Deon: Well, specifically, I've been a bishop now for three months and 10 days, not that I'm counting, but I've been a priest for 16 years. One of the things that I think has changed in the leadership, primarily in the church, is the realization that the priest or the clergy person by themselves, that model is slowly dying. I think we realizing that to put a priest in one congregation or a one-ministry context and expecting that somehow miracles are going to happen is unrealistic. When you look at Jesus, He sent the disciples out in twos. So I think some of the new models that we might have to look at are clergy working in conjunction with, rather than on their own.

Kyle: Are there particular models that seem promising to you in that regard?

Deon: One of the things that we're beginning to experiment in the diocese of Missouri is a regional model. Where a group of churches, the churches are served by multiple clergy working as a team, rather than one clergy person being assigned to the congregation, that the clergy are assigned to that region.

The deacon, the priest, and the lay folks work in conjunction, looking at the area, rather than just this specific congregation. We're in the early stages of planning and figuring out what that looks like, but there's lots of excitement looking at that new model because what it does is it stops the clergy person from feeling like you have to produce, that if your congregation isn't growing, you're not doing something important.

Kyle: Yes, it's on you.

Deon: It's on you, where a team can look at a situation, look at a congregation, look at the ministry area and say, "Where can our resources, where can our time, where can our energy be focused in ministry?"

Kyle: Your mentioning that is reminding me of a conversation I had with a colleague I met quite a few years ago now, a guy named Jason Evans, a church planter, he's in the Diocese of Texas now, and he said something like, "I think we've been doing this all wrong. Again, Jesus sent out people out two by two, what would it be like if church planters--" and I think he even said, "as friends and colleagues who went out to do that work together and to carry that together." I just remember feeling this, I'm not a church planter, but even just hearing him talk about that, I just remember my shoulders eased a little bit. I just thought that just makes so much sense.

Deon: Well, it puts us in a very missionary mind because we didn't send out missionaries by themselves. If you go all the way back, we packed them on a ship with their family and another two or three missionaries, and there often would be their things. We do that in every other aspect, except when we come to ministry.

We say the vestry is a team and diocese is a convention, general convention, we do this team and group thinking, but yet when we come to the basic unit of the Episcopal Church, which is a congregation, we go, "Oh, well, you're by yourself." We can make the argument, well, yes, that clergy are working in tandem with the vestry and the lay leadership, but it's not the same thing.

If you look at most, perhaps, program or corporate-sized congregations, there's multiple clergy working together. People seem to be a lot happier in those teams because you can walk down the hall to a clergy colleague, and in this virtual world, you can Zoom down the hall with a colleague and have a conversation about something specific. Looking at a region, to me, is a way that we can shape our leaders for both success in their ministry and for the communities that they're serving.

Kyle: Yes, that's so helpful. Thank you.

I'm curious if there are some stories of new leadership in your context that you're hearing that are making you hopeful for the future of the church.

Deon: Well, one of the very hopeful things for me is seeing the creativity that both clergy and lay leaders have undertaken in the midst of this pandemic. Who would have thought that the Episcopal Church would be online, that all the clergy, but not all, most of the clergy would be televangelists or Zoom evangelists if you want to call it or Facebook evangelist and that folks would be wanting to continue this even after this is all done?

One of the most joyful moments, for me, recently is at a visitation, which was 10 people in the room or something, and the senior warden, who was 85, came up to me to admonish me to say, "When we're back in person, we need to continue to do this live-streaming thing because people need to be connected" and talk about things you never thought you would hear the Episcopal Church that people want to have live stream and Zoom coffee hour and all of this stuff.

One of the things that's happening is that we're seeing a set of pent-up creativity. I think we're also seeing a lot of opportunity to do something different. I've had more phone conversations with congregations wanting to go, "You know what, maybe it's time to rip out our pews and make our space flexible. Maybe it's time for us to rethink what we're doing with our building," so that's been energizing me. These are conversations we probably should have been having 20 years ago, but I guess in pandemic, you never waste a good crisis.

Kyle: Oh, that's really cool. Are some congregations going forward with some of that, or is it early enough?

Deon: Yes, there's a recognition, I think, that we're going to be living in a hybrid world. If there's a vaccine for COVID-19 tomorrow and we're all back in church by Easter, we're still going to be needing to live stream. We're going to recognize that we don't have to go drive 90 miles to have a meeting that lasts 20 minutes. I suspect that the long-term ramifications and the creativity that's going to come out of this is going to be our boost for the church if we lean into it.

My fear is that we just go, "Okay, pandemic over, we're done. Let's go back to how we were." The language I've been using here in the Diocese of Missouri is we have to prepare for our next normal.

Kyle: Our next normal, oh, I like that. I'm curious, I've been involved over the years in lots of hybrid initiatives and stuff, and one of the questions you always get from folks is, is that going to take away from what happens in-person? If we're live-streaming, is that going to somehow diminish our gathering?" Are you hearing that? If so, what are you saying to folks?

Deon: Well, I think there are some folks that are worried about, what does an online live stream worship actually do? The thing is, as Episcopalians, we are incarnational, we like to touch, to see, to feel. We like to be in a room, we like to hug, we like to shake hands, we like-- Our Sunday worship is a big dining room with a meal, so we are incarnational, we like the tactile stuff. There's obviously some fear of you can't do

that while you're sitting behind the computer screen or on your phone. There are some people who are obviously expressing that fear.

At the same time, we recognize that if I can't make it to church this morning because I'm sick in bed, I can still feel connected to my worshiping community by Zooming in or watching it on a live stream. I think that people are going to find that invaluable. You don't have people sit at home in their pajamas for six months and go to church in pajamas for six months and not expect that they're going to want to do that every once in a while.

Kyle: Then that person who's sick in bed, that's an incarnational experience as well. Here's the place where the good news can meet that reality also.

Deon: Well, I've gotten emails from folks because we've been trying to make sure we highlight different live streams across the diocese. I've gotten emails from people, particularly those who are elderly, who have discovered their iPad can now connect them to church, who've been saying, "It's so good to see my childhood church. I'm sick, and I can't leave the nursing home, I can't get out of my house. I don't want to leave my house. It feels so good to feel connected." Those type of stories have been tremendously heartening.

Kyle: I want to invite you to think big now. if you were to commission or maybe team-teach, but if you were to think up some kind of special topics course, any course, and any instructor for today's seminarians, the sky's the limit, you can get whoever you want to teach whatever you want, what's your pitch for that?

Deon: I see you go with easy questions. I honestly think one of the things that sometimes is missing in our communities is that sense of just deep-abiding joy. If I had to think, I would go with two instructors, The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu because they did the collaboration on that *Book of Joy*, to put the two of them in a room to teach folks how to just find their joy.

Kyle: In your own ministry, how have you tried to draw that message in that way of being out in communities?

Deon: Well, I'm an eternal optimist. I'm not naive, but I'm an eternal optimist. I'm one of those crazy people who believe that the best years of the church is ahead of us, that we spend way too much time looking back and pining about what has been, instead of dreaming big about what can be. I've been in way too many meetings as a priest where I've been hearing people bemoaning the fact that the megachurch moved in, and it's doing so well, and why can't we?

It's like you have everything that you need right here. You're just looking backwards at what had been, rather than using the gifts and skills that God gave you right now. For me, church is supposed to be the place where you come to find that good news. It's called a gospel for a reason. It is good news. If on Sunday morning and you can't proclaim it like good news, stay home.

Kyle: Makes sense.

We do want to talk about changes that perhaps we should be making in how we form leaders. If there was one change that the pragmatics were no question and you could make it happen, one change to how we train leaders that would make a positive difference for the Episcopal Church, what do you think that would be?

Deon: I think we could probably train them for the church that we're serving now and not the church that was in 1950s. Don't get me wrong, I loved my seminary education, it was an amazingly formative time for me, but then when I hit the ground, I realized I was formed for a church that no longer exists. My colleagues were formed for churches that were no longer existing. One of the things for me that I've realized is that the church, for years, was concerned about right theology, we had to get a theology of everything right. We were educating the head, the mind. With the advent of social media with Google, folks can Google transubstantiation and concepts. They can find all those theological concepts, and they're going to come with their own theories and thinking on their own.

What we've neglected is the stirring of the heart, as Charles Wesley called it, that church should be a worshipful experience, that we should be able to connect to the divine, that we should have something transcendent when we gather together. You can't google transcendent, you can't google that feeling of awe. I like Marianne Williamson's--The three type of prayers that we offer are help, thank you, and awe. We are called, I think, as the church, to form leaders that can give that sense of awe, that folks are in the presence of the divine. We also need some of the practical stuff like how to engage social media, how to have difficult conversations with vestries, the type of stuff, how do you actually lead people to a different way of thinking and being?

We need those practical things. I think, ultimately, it stems from that experience of something transcendent when you step across that threshold, whether it's physical or not, that you're stepping into something that's transcendent, and that transcendence should be accompanied with a joy.

Kyle: You talked about forming folks for the church as it is. I think we're starting to get this picture, it's a joyful church, experiencing this transcendent sense of God's presence, perhaps led by folks collaboratively working across different regions. What are some other marks of what this church of now or of what's to come looks like for you?

Deon: I think it's a church that is confident in telling its story. We, as Episcopalians, are really good at keeping the church and what we do in church a secret. We will talk about everything except what we do in church. I think part of that is that both lay and sometimes the clergy aren't comfortable with just sharing their story.

What I've been saying here is, if we find a really good restaurant, when you could go to restaurants, we go tell everybody. Whenever you meet your friends, the first thing you do is like, "Oh, you have got to go to the restaurant, the food was really good" or whatnot, but we don't do the same thing about our churches or the communities that we serve.

We don't say-- I always love the idea that on a Monday morning, if a friend asked, "How was your weekend?" that you can say, "The sermon on Sunday was just

absolutely amazing," or "The choir was amazing," or "The youth lead the service, and they did a fantastic job," I think being able to just tell the stories of those good news.

One of the joys I had, when I was in parish ministry, was being a fly on the wall on a conversation, hearing one of our young people, who was in their teens, tell another teen young person that was visiting about what it felt like to go through Rite-13, that "It's this amazing experience. The whole congregation was around me, and they put their hands on me, and I felt so much love." Hearing a 14-year-old tell that to another 14-year-old friend, who does not necessarily normally come to church, for me, was "There's the church at its best."

Kyle: Wow. Do you think that this hesitance is about a kind of shyness from a sense of religion being a public thing, or what do you think that comes from, that sort of hesitation?

Deon: Well, I think it comes from what I call bullying spirituality, those folks that show up at your door and threaten you with, "Have you found Jesus?" I saw a billboard the other day, "Do you know we are going to spend eternity smoking or non-smoking?" It was a really terrible joke. The point was the same, Christianity has a public relations problem.

I think that we buy into it quite well, but the challenge that we face is that we have to change the narrative. The popular culture of Christianity, that popular narrative, is not universal. The best evangelism is simply sharing your story with another and inviting them into that story. For me, I think the hesitancy comes from, we don't want to be perceived as "those people" because we know who we're talking about.

Kyle: Yes. If we're going to try to differentiate in that way, we should differentiate through sharing and through joy, not through silence.

Deon: Bullying doesn't work, and silence, certainly, doesn't work. Sharing the good news, the joy that you have to share, I think is where we're at.

Kyle: Yes. Amen.

As we wrap up here, I'm curious, what other advice you might share with a seminary that is contemplating its future mission and future role. What would you have us think about in the years ahead?

Deon: Well, I think a big piece of what seminaries could contemplate is looking beyond the place where students graduate, looking particularly to-- I don't want to say re-educate, but to continue to educate clergy to offer opportunities. I know that there are graduate opportunities and stuff like that, but it's offering opportunities from a distance sometimes that folks can come back and do a refresher on, what's the most recent theology on this?

What's the most recent stuff on being a missional church? Our seminaries are our incubators. I think a lot of the times we think that once you're out of seminary, you're done. I think the seminaries have a really good role in playing and continuing that process of incubating.

Kyle: Yes, and if our theology is that the people we're serving are on these lifelong journeys of faith, why would it be any different for us as leaders?

Bishop Deon, thank you so much for taking the time to be with us. We look forward to how folks respond to the contributions you've shared. Thank you so much.

Deon: Awesome. Thank you very much and bless you for what you're doing and highlighting all of this across the church.

Outro: Crossings Conversations is a co-productions of Church Divinity School of the Pacific and Trinity Church Wall Street. If you enjoyed the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts or share it with a colleague. You can more about the only Episcopal seminary on the west coast and subscribe to Crossings Magazine at cdsp.edu