



**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:** This is Kyle Oliver, communications and marketing manager at Church Divinity School of the Pacific. I'm here with Reverend Isaiah Shaneequa Brokenleg, staff officer for racial reconciliation for the Episcopal Church. Shaneequa, thanks you so much for being with us.

**Rev. Isaiah:** It's great to be here.

**Kyle:** This is the conversation that we're having with lots of leaders across the Episcopal Church about the future of leadership formation. I know you've been in the position that you're in for a relatively short period of time, so feel free to answer this question however you like. We're curious about how the people we're talking to, how they're thinking about leadership formation might have changed over the years. I'm wondering what you think about that.

**Rev. Isaiah:** It's definitely changed over the years. If you look at Jesus' time, leadership was a servant type of leadership. Somehow, we got into this weird patriarchal leader structure which is very hierarchical. Then, that was the way it was. Probably, that's what we think of when we think of our church's leadership structure.

I think it's starting to change a little more now. We're coming back to the servant idea of leadership. I think also looking at what leadership looks like in different ethnic groups. I know like for-- In college, when they were hiring for the office of residential life, the RAs or whatever, they would always look at how people were being leaders. I was like, "You don't see that the Asian folks are leaders too. They're just leading by example rather than trying to control the situation all the time." Leadership looks different in different cultures. We need to be thinking about that.

I think you're starting to see more recognition of that very cultural leadership and people acknowledging that and looking at that and recognizing that. I think now

you're also seeing more leadership as maybe more facilitation or organizing and almost like maybe-- I liken it a lot to like being a midwife, you're there to help give birth to whatever's happening and you're not there to control it because that's not your role. Your role is there to be more of a help or guide or doula in that process.

**Kyle:** Do you think that that intercultural awareness of leadership styles is one of the places where our intercultural competency needs to grow as a church?

**Rev. Isaiah:** Oh, yeah.

[laughter]

**Rev. Isaiah:** Without question, yeah. You're raised to have an identity as a cultural individual.

I was raised to have identity as a Lakota person, and specifically a Winkte which is that third gender two-spirit role. I have that identity. Going to a seminary, that's not based in my culture, there's pieces that they're not even aware of, that they're indoctrinating you into and they're trying to make you white or whatever the seminary culture is, which for most places, it's white. They're not even aware that that's happening. Along with all those things that you have to learn, you have to really struggle to maintain your identity.

The question I had to constantly ask myself was, "How can I maintain and stay myself while also learning, but not giving up my identity as a Lakota person or as a Winkte person or whatever?" I think as educational systems start to think about that or look at different models. I also went to school out in Vancouver School of Theology, which has an indigenous ministry program, completely different way of teaching, completely different way of understanding how your relationship between your culture and your education can work together rather than it being something that is sometimes competing with things.

They recognize leadership a lot differently. I think our church, I wish it did that too. The discernment process, for example, a lot of folks, they discern inside out, which maybe is the Western model. I feel like I am called, and then my discernment process is set up for the community to then affirm it or not.

Whereas in a lot of collectivistic cultures, it's actually the opposite. You discern outside in. My community is telling me, "We think you're called to the priesthood. We think you need to go forward with this. You need to start checking this out." As a servant leader, you're there to listen to your community and to do what they say. Especially in my role as a Winkte, that's part of my job too. Then, when you're going into that discernment process, it's not set up to help you with that internal space because it's so used to doing the inside out model.

Thinking about how that works and how do-- Maybe it's the collectivistic and individualistic thing, but how do we switch to be a more collectivistic model of education or of our system and looking at how education and how leaders show up in those spaces.

**Kyle:** That's super helpful. Thank you.

What are some stories of leadership from new leaders that you're hearing or participating in that make you hopeful for the future of the church?

**Rev. Isaiah:** That's a good question. Good example. I think we have to get out of this mindset that the clergy are the leaders. We also have to think about lay leaders. Example, a young woman who's from the cathedral here in Sioux Falls, she was like, "This is the most lengthiest dawn lent that I've ever had this summer. I just wish we had some kind of pride thing." That's what she wanted to do, so she took the lead and started organizing people and calling people and we put together this Episco-pride that happened across the country and it included lots of folks of color and held up Black Lives Matter. It worked out really well and she just took the lead and it was this amazing thing that happened. I think it couldn't have happened outside of a COVID situation because of all the virtual things that could have taken place.

All these different folks anyway that came in and into play. That was a wonderful example of something that could happen.

I also, I'm seeing some wonderful collaborations that don't normally take place. I think sometimes in the past, clergy tend to be really competitive with each other. It was like, who has the higher ASA and who has the blah, blah, blah.

I know in Indian country, that's always a challenge for us because as Indian people, we tend to go to church differently than others. We might even go once a month or we go seasonally or we think of things as a season rather than as an every Sunday thing. The priest often would be like, "Don't ask me my ASA or my annual income or whatever". They'll be, "Ask me how many funerals I've done, how many weddings I've done, how many community events could I say that the Episcopal Church had a hand in?" That's a better way maybe to measure, "How have I helped to improve this community or been a member of the community?"

I think now folks so much more are able to ask for help, are able to work together, able to be like, they don't see it as a sign of weakness. I think that was the risk this model before where like the priest had to know it all or had to do everything at the end there and to be vulnerable was a weakness. Now I think we're seeing a different sort of model. I think the model that's coming up is a much more Jesus centered model.

I think that makes me hopeful for the future because it's a future that says, yes, we can make mistakes. Yes, we can change. Yes, we can be flexible. All those things that a church needs to do if it wants to stay relevant and folks are doing that.

**Kyle:** I think I'm hearing you say that COVID in some ways has given us permission to be vulnerable and to be more collaborative. I'm wondering, how do you think we preserve that sense of permission and collaboration, and that sort of sense of like non-hierarchical possibility beyond COVID, if beyond COVID is even a sensible category?

**Rev. Isaiah:** I think COVID didn't necessarily make us more vulnerable. I think we were more vulnerable on our own. I think that sort of happened, but I think COVID sort of forced us to collaborate or think about things differently.

Sometimes it just takes some thinking out of the box, I think COVID helped us to do that thinking out of the box, but I think that vulnerable piece is just a change in how we think of a new model of leadership that you see growing and I think it takes-- I don't know exactly where it started. I just know you're seeing it more and more and people aren't- some people still are, that where they're like, "I have to decide and it's on me and blah blah blah."

I think there's more of a sense of, it's not about me, it's about the community or about the work that we're doing with the ministry that we're doing, and you're starting to see that more and more. then may be a generational thing or maybe it's a- who knows? I don't know.

**Kyle:** Yes, but a positive development nevertheless. For this question, I want to invite you to really think big. We wanted to encourage participants to think a little outside the box in terms of what a seminary class might look like. If you could like commission or if you wanted to co-teach or what have you, if the sky was the limit and you could invite anyone to teach some kind of special topics course for today's seminarians, who would you invite and what would you want them to teach?

**Rev. Isaiah:** Oh my Gosh. A couple of things that are just sort of on my-- One is like, we need to teach our seminaries to be facilitators. I think that's not a skill that we teach them and that's the thing that they have to do a lot. Especially people look to them as leaders so they might be doing some community thing. They should be able to facilitate, they need to run vestry meetings. There's just all sorts of examples of why this is so valuable and there's not a course, at least it's never one that I saw.

I was trained in technology of participation or what they call TOPS facilitation model. I love those. I am like an evangelist for them. Also then we got the ethnic missionaries were trained in that model too.

I wish there was a class in organizing for ministries kind of like that class, but a class that helps us learn how to get folks from the pew to the public square or from the pew to the protest. I think we have so many--

As Episcopalians, we like to sit in our pews and not move. We're like, we'll just write a check if we have to, we don't really like to get our hands dirty. I think for so long that's helped us to perpetuate white supremacy. That's been part of the reason why those things are allowed to happen. I think we need a class to give people like all the different pieces of that that are important. Like what's the theological reasoning why we shouldn't just sit on our butts, why we need to get out there, why we should be a transformative church.

Then maybe some practical skills about it. Here are some things you can do. Here's how to be a movement chaplain or a protest chaplain. Here's how you might want to think about organizing the community to do that. There's lots of different pieces in that.

I think no amount of seminary training can teach you everything you need to actually when you go out there, which I think is the biggest-- That's the thing that we got to tell everybody. I think that there should be like a class afterward, like, 'So now that you're in ministry,' or whatever you want to call it I could see like a panel and I just think it would be like a nice monthly meeting type of thing where the class could come and folks could share their challenges.

When I started fresh out of seminary, I was the vicar at a really small congregation in rural South Dakota. It would have been helpful if I could find another alum who had a similar sort of those kind of demographics. It's just helpful to have somebody you can talk to. I think that'd be a great, awesome, cool project or program or something?

**Kyle:** Well, we didn't want to start with this question because I think it's important to start from a tone of positivity. I'm curious from your perspective, what's one change we could make to how leaders are trained at CDSP and the Episcopal Church, however you want to answer that, that would really make a positive difference?

**Rev. Isaiah:** I think curacy should be a requirement. It should be paid, obviously. I just think that's so helpful for folks. I like the Lutheran model in some ways because they go out and they do that, then they come back for the third year.

**Kyle:** Oh, that's right, yes.

**Rev. Isaiah:** I just think it would be so helpful to have a two or three-year curacy after and it was just part of the process that you would go through. Ideally, it'd be something that you'd work on with your bishop. I think that could be really helpful for folks.

The other thing is, I think we need to train our leaders to be transformative leaders, to be able to see a system and change it to make it better. I don't think we train folks to do that. Also entrepreneurial leaders. Our church is not the wealthy church it used to be and so we're going to have to figure out what that might look like, how to do entrepreneurial ministry, things that we can do to make that work. If we have that transformative leadership model, you'll know how to take whatever the world's coming at you with and be able to use it.

**Kyle:** I'm just curious if there's any other advice that you would share with a seminary that's contemplating its future mission, and role?

**Rev. Isaiah:** That's tough. I think there's a funding sustainability piece that they have to figure out. We really need to endow our seminary so that they can grow and be healthy into the future. Along with that, maybe we need to think about not just training priests, but how are we're training lay leaders. What might that look like and recognizing that maybe they're not after an MDiv, maybe they're after something else?

I think we need to figure out how to remove the-- What I talked about earlier that white supremacy or Western indoctrination that's in our pedagogy. We need to take that out of there somehow, or start to tease it to help folks of color maintain their identity while going through the educational process. I think part of that is we're going

to have to try radically new ways of educating folks, like something that doesn't necessarily involve a classroom. Some of the best training I got for being a priest and working at the parish was actually being the sacristan at the chapel, that leaps and bounds.

**Kyle:** Yes, and there's something I think wise about that pedagogical vision, that an embodied experience, a practical experience of really being able to try things out. Lots of folks in these conversations have mentioned the importance of failure. Classrooms are not necessarily places where we're encouraged to make mistakes, or if we do, they're sort of seen as punitive rather than as a value-neutral learning opportunity. That makes a lot of sense to me.

**Rev. Isaiah:** When I have a grade attached, at least for me, my anxiety goes through the roof. As Indian people, you can look at the studies, we don't like grades, we're not good with that. We don't like tests. We're much more experiential, and we can feed you something but more conversationally, which is one of the things I liked about the Canadian program. Any paper you had to do, you can do orally. You have a conversation with the professor, they ask you questions, you give them feedback and that's so much more helpful.

If we go back to looking like Lakota culture, you study under the medicine person, and they guide you and help you, and they kind of push you, and they can see, whatever they call your shadow self. They can help push things out and figure that out. It's expected to be a good relationship, but I think in seminary it's so much like a school with grades and with classrooms and all that stuff. That's a totally different model.

I think some of that like apprentice style of things, that also is helpful because it lets you slowly step into it. Like when I've helped Lakota, I don't call them medicine people, but people who are traditional Lakota spirituality folks, they taught me how to build a sweat lodge. So I know how to do it. I helped do the stones one day, or they might ask me to do different things, then I slowly learned the role. I don't need to be a deacon to do that or might not need to priesthood to do that. But, they know when you're ready, and they can ask you to lead the sweat when you're ready, or they can ask you whatever.

I think it's the same. It could be the same with churches if we had more of a grey area

**Kyle:** That's a lot to think about. Well, Shanequa, thank you so much for being with us for this conversation. We really appreciate your time and your insight.

**Rev. Isaiah:** Yes. Thank you so much for having me. It's been great to talk to you.

**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](http://cdsp.edu)