



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 Bishop Mary Gray-Reeves, who is Managing Director of the College for Bishops and Bishop Diocesan of El Camino Real, resigned. Bishop Mary, thanks very much for being with us.

Bishop Mary Gray-Reeves: Thank you for having me, Kyle.

Kyle: Before we start, could you give us the quick version of what the College for Bishops is and does?

Bishop Mary: Yes, the College for Bishops is actually its own nonprofit and its role is to support the formation and education of bishops throughout, really, their whole ministry.

It's most known for the first three years of a bishop's tenure where they are in a program called Living Our Vows, where they're really learning and doing formation work to live into this vocation of episcopate, which is quite different than priestly ministry at the parochial level or on a diocesan staff.

My task is to create programming and to help bishops learn together well. The way I've been thinking about it is to actually protect the space of bishops for learning and to be responsive to their own learning edges and curves. Somebody reminded me the other day of a quote from Peter Drucker, which is that when you're a CEO, which actually, legally, bishops are, CEO and president, you have to become an expert at doing things half-ass, pardon my French, but just quoting the author.

We want bishops to be deep and to spend time thinking, but we want them to do it at 100 miles an hour, which is just not realistic. I consider my job, actually, helping them to balance that and to support their work in that way.

Kyle: Great. Well, I think that'll be a rich additional context for thinking about some of these questions about leadership formation. To start, I'd love to hear, since you've been serving in this position, or either position, how has your thinking about leadership formation changed?

Bishop Mary: Well, I'm working in a pretty different context of leader formation. 140 CEOs in a room at a given time is a bit of a different context than diocesan ministry. It's been a great cause for reflection myself about, "Okay, how do we do this here?" Which is one of the important questions that our institutions of theological and ministry formation, lay and clergy need to think about it, is, how do we do this here and now instead of doing it 50 years ago, and then? Those are the questions that I think are critical to ask.

One of the things I've been fond of saying as a bishop and also now on this new role as managing director of the college, is to remind people that we don't need permission to think about things and to try many new things. We just don't need to ask permission for that. Because we're a church that loves its order and our general convention, the way we make decisions, we often overdo the formality of that process.

As a bishop, and bishop in Silicon Valley, I was always trying to encourage people, "Just go try it. Let's stay in conversation. It doesn't work, let's figure out what we learned from that. Let's not worry about the mistakes. Let's worry about what we're learning." The critical reality that is before us that we are proclaiming good news in a world that, increasingly, does not speak religious language.

The conversation cannot be, I don't think, any more about, "Let me convince you that what I believe is right and that you want to believe it too," but rather, a conversation and dialogue between perspectives and realities that are equally valuable.

Kyle: What are some of the ways we try to help leaders make that shift from those two different ways of engaging folks who might not be already connected to the church?

Bishop Mary: I think the basic skill of learning how to listen across difference is one that we need to spend far more time on.

A good chunk of it is really about learning how to listen to each other's stories and to value those stories. To be companions on a spiritual journey that does not have a definitive end of six weeks of baptism, formation, and weekly attendance at church. So, to be much more open, and learners in a process of relationship building versus the creation of church membership, which I know sounds a bit agnostic in our world of church, but I think that's actually where we need to be. I think it actually deepens our faith because our trust in the spirit, rather than our knowledge of church or our ability to be persuasive, has to be humbled.

Kyle: Christ is there with these folks that we're meeting as much as with us.

Bishop Mary: Absolutely, yes.

Kyle: Thank you. Anything else you want to say about your evolving thinking about how leaders in the church should be formed?

Bishop Mary: I was pondering the questions that you sent, and also just been reading lately, Amy Edmondson's book called *The Fearless Organization*. To me, it's really about creating psychological safety in organizations, but the ability to have much more cross germination of ideas, so people feel safe to speak their ideas and their stories. The organization is going to get stronger because they will have much greater sharing of power across a team.

One of the things she notes is that 20 years ago, people had to collaborate about 50% less than they do now.

Collaboration is an essential work skill now in the workplace. I often still teach people, one person preach a sermon, one person plan a liturgy. That isn't always the case, but sometimes we get this mindset, particularly, about ordained people, or even lay people that are facilitating or managing a ministry, it's my ministry. To move much more into group process, to train in group process, to activate healthy groups for ministry activity. Community organizing was big for us in El Camino Real, really, because that was the practice, was that you went and worked with some other group that had nothing to do with your group, but you had a common interest in terms of serving the wider community. Improving those skills, which I know is happening in our seminaries and I think is a really important thing.

I'm really big into learning organizations. Helping the church be a faithful learning organization of discipleship and apostleship rather than an organization that needs to learn what it's supposed to know about itself and speak it; so rather, an organization that's constantly learning, how does this work in the world? What does it mean anymore? What does Christianity mean? How is it relevant?

I've been pleased, after George Floyd's horrible death and the protests in our country, to see some boldness and bravery from the pulpit, especially, the newly ordained perhaps feel a bit nervous speaking out, but they are. That gives me hope as we name our faith and the radical presence of Jesus as having an appropriate and Godly place in the town square that's full of protest. That's a good thing. That's just a lot of great cross germination that I think is really important for us.

It isn't easy. It isn't easy when people want church to be away from all of that, they want a quiet place where they can go and calm down. It's a very challenging piece for local clergy who are stimulating, doing formation and congregational life to strike that balance between, how do we develop our spirituality and increase the depth of the peace that passes all understanding while continuing to work for it in the wider community. That is the Christian, that is the balance between discipleship internally and apostleship in the world that all of us have to sort out as followers of Jesus.

Kyle: I'm curious if there are maybe any other stories that you have heard, witnessed, experienced from new leaders of any kind, broadly defined, that are making you hopeful about where the church is heading?

Bishop Mary: Well, I just finished what we call a salon in the College for Bishops. One of the things we do is have informal settings for learning where a small group of bishops might take a lead on working on a particular topic.

We just finished another one on setting a table in the wilderness, so really exploring more deeply the theological and ecclesiological impact of "Virtual Eucharist", but really, what is the missional future of the church as we think about this land, if you will, of the web. How do we live there well? There are implications in that, in the sense that it's somebody else's space, it's commodified, it's not private. They take information based on what you say online and go use it to sell you an ad.

There are a lot of things we haven't always thought about in our desire to deliver our product and to get isolated into our narrow in terms of that product. Church is very big, it's beyond Eucharist on Sunday morning. I'm watching leaders sort that out across the board, lay and clergy. I think that's the big question. Where are we going in our missional future and how will we do that, not leaving our past behind, and do it with our vocational integrity as the baptized?

I'm seeing that around. It's just in any number of places, EDS, Kelly Brown Douglas, they've done some good Facebook small interviews similar to this kind of format where they've talked about church in the age of COVID, what does that look like? I think that's stuff we need to keep pushing and talking about because this is going to result in something, we're not going back to something that was. The garlic and onions were great in Egypt, let's go back and get them. That's not happening. What are we doing to move forward?

I hear that in people. I'm new to Charlotte, so I'm meeting new people. I have new neighbors and it's really interesting to hear their stories of how life is changing. Then working with one congregation, they want me to help them do some strategic planning, but it was clear no plan was going to happen because you can't plan right now. We shifted it to strategic discernment.

We've done instead, the spiritual practice of the examen, which has been just giving people a deep reverence for this time and to just slow down and stop and really examine what's happening here in terms of what is the spirit doing and what is edifying and what do we have to offer? What is depleting and what should I not be worried about? The planet, certainly, giving us a great big message to slow down and be more reverent. I think those are all really good things for us to be noticing right now.

I think I hear and see people finding balance and looking for different ways forward, and that will require our spiritual discipline to stick with it.

Kyle: Yes, I love that. The image of the garlic and onions and an openness to what might be out there instead, to the milk and honey, I suppose. That's a nice image.

Bishop Mary: Yes, garlic and onions will taste differently somewhere else because it's grown in different dirt.

Kyle: Yes, different. Yes.

This next question, we're inviting folks to think big as a thought exercise, if nothing else. If you were to commission or make a bold invitation to anyone you please to teach a course or to co-teach a course if you want to be involved in the thought experiment, who would you invite to teach and what course would you hope they would share?

Bishop Mary: Well, it was a tie. I had fun with this one. I'm a big learning organization devotee, so it was a toss-up between Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer. I know his work better, but his co-author on a book called *Leading from the Emerging Future* is Katrin Kaufer. The dream class would be to co-teach with all three of them on how could the Christianity in this age, learning about being a faithful learning organization, because I still use this unidirectional transfer of information and we see it in the house of bishops too. It's the traditional way of teaching and a learning community means everybody's got something to teach and everybody's got something to learn. I would love to spend a few weeks in a room with them talking about church.

Leading from the Emerging Future, actually, it's so funny when I read that book, it's like reading a letter from Paul. The stuff about the body and it has many parts, it's all right there. I'm like, "This guy must be a Christian." That would be my dream team.

Kyle: You've mentioned it several times and I want to make sure I and our listeners and readers are tracking closely with you. When you talk about the church as a learning organization, I think, we're with you so far, and I heard you talking about the one-way flow. Good news as like static transmission of a message. Help us put some flesh on the bones of the alternative. What does it look like for the church to be a learning organization, with a special proclamation? What would church as learning organization look like in my neighborhood or that kind of thing?

[00:21:31] Bishop Mary: It would probably look different in different places. It goes back to that listening. We can look at the Episcopal Church in the continental United States. It's a very white middle, upper-middle-class, pretty well-educated place. You can look at us and see we're not listening very well across socioeconomic diversity or racial, cultural diversity.

For me, I read the first chapter of Genesis and I, "Wow, God just loves diversity," yet, we seem to always shy away from it, move away from it. We're just inclined to be in like settings. So, to be more intentional about gathering diversity to really listen and to become a new creation out of the stories and the people we take into our being, and that we let be taken in by another. I would talk about, we're developing a third culture. It's an alternative that, as we are gathered in grace and in the presence of Christ and we are transformed, this new thing happens. Then we can maintain our diversity and yet still have that beautiful thread of spirit and essence between us.

To be delivered in learning organizations means that everybody has something to offer. The well-educated clergyperson preaching the sermon and the very newly baptized person who's just stumbled into church, voices matter.

I had just a wonderful man join our board and he'd been baptized, I think, a year when he came on to the board of the diocese. We were just going around and he was saying what he does for a living, he said, "I work on the Genome Project." I'm

like, "Okay," we go on to the next person, like, "Did he say he works on the Genome Project?" This is a very interesting person who's grown up as an atheist and baptized in his adult life and who works in this incredible environment across disciplines. The Genome Project has many disciplines that work on it. He had enormous things to bring to the institutional church which is busy maintaining itself. That's a learning organization. It's when you say, "Tell me more. Tell me more. What do you need to make sure I hear from you?" So that the voices have a much more egalitarian view.

Kyle: I love that notion of ever-emerging third culture that is a dynamic hybridity of the contributions of this ever-evolving community. That's cool.

Bishop Mary: Jesus might have called it the kingdom.

Kyle: Yes, thank you. We intentionally put this question fourth so that we weren't starting here, but we think it's important, in these conversations, to talk about where there might be some pretty concrete need for changes in how we're training leaders. I'm curious about one change for how we train leaders in the church that you think would make a positive difference.

Bishop Mary: I hesitate to answer it because I'm not in the day-to-day life or in the classroom of any of our seminaries, but I do think this encouragement of being out in the community and failing, trying stuff and crossing lines so that you find them, and then you learn how to move them. I would say to my seminarians, and to our commission on ministry, you had to take community organizing to be in the ordination. You couldn't get ordained without it.

You wanted to do CPE and community organizing training because we've been training chaplains and it's important to have that skill, pastoral chaplaincy, and it's important to know how to organize and to work with others and to not always be the person that has the thing to give, but to also be the person that has the thing to receive, which then increases our capacity for vulnerability.

We don't often put these words together, but as we actually become more comfortable with what I would say, the spiritual practice of vulnerability, like actually, not finding yourself there because often, then we feel ashamed, like, "Oh, I feel so exposed," but actually, to place ourselves there and to say, "I'm going to just come into this. I'm going to say things like "I don't know" or "tell me more," to put ourselves in that questioning space, actually, increases our resilience.

They may seem like opposites, vulnerability and resilience, but actually, one facilitates the other. It is just like that discipleship apostleship balance, that inner peace, creating outer peace balance. Vulnerability and resilience for the brokenness in the world, as we know brokenness to be strength in the midst of it. Even as we don't know what's coming.

Kyle: I appreciate that answer, and in particular, I like the way you put it, the permission to go out and fail. Pedagogically, that's a helpful reminder in the process of education or formation or learning or whatever, that academic culture tends to be quite-- Failing is what you do when you don't pass the class, not the way to pass the class.

Bishop Mary: Yes, it's kind of, if I go back to your question, is what's the advice? Always have a component in your class that has students that they have to fail, they're required to fail at something and then learn how to examine the failure. How do I go about really contemplating what didn't work here and what is the fruit that's born out of it?

The Old Testament has plenty of-- Even God says, I don't think I'll do that again, after the flood, with Noah. It's like, "I'm not really sure that I actually had the impact I was hoping for." Because poor Noah, goes right back out and commits the immortal sin, and he starts all over again by cursing one of his kids. The first words he speaks, he doesn't speak the whole story, and then God is like, "Maybe that didn't work out so well." [laughs]

Kyle: I even wonder about the rainbow covenant as a symbol of the learning, almost, or of the new orientation that came from the experiment that may not have yielded what was intended.

Bishop Mary: Yes, let's wipe it out and start over, but then that gets really-- I mean, then for Christians, what's replaced there is the work of reconciliation. That's the way forward.

Kyle: Yes, well, you nodded to it already, but any other advice you would give? Again, this can be to CDSP, to theological education, to fellow bishops, but advice you might give to people entrusted with this work of forming leaders as we contemplate a new or renewed mission and role?

Bishop Mary: Yes, I think one of our questions always needs to be, is the institution of the church serving the mission as well as it could be. What do we need to do to be in deeper conversation about the relationship between the two?

Kyle: Are there practices or texts that have helped you in your own ministry to be asking and re-asking that question and seeking that balance?

Bishop Mary: Well, I think as Bishop Curry reminds us often of Martin Luther King's words, before you march, meditate on the words of Jesus. I had a priest in my early 20s, as I was contemplating ordained ministry, he just said something that's always stuck with me: When in doubt, go back and read the gospels because it's just pure there. Like the 12 steps, it's just pure spirituality. It's just pure spiritual process. So, no matter where you're coming from, you can get somewhere in recovery because you're just work in the process.

Jesus is just working the process. The spiritual dynamics with everybody He encounters and truth is being told and justice is happening. For me, that's one of my basics. It's like, if you're confused, just go back to the gospel and then pull your big girl pants on and be courageous and say what you think it says. That's pretty simple.

Kyle: Well, I think it's also a great note to end on. Bishop Mary, thank you very much for taking the time to contribute to this project.

Bishop Mary: It's my pleasure. Thank you. I'm honored to have been asked.

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