



**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 the Right Reverend Thomas Brown of the Diocese of Maine. Bishop Brown, thanks so much for being with us.

**Bishop Thomas Brown:** Thank you so much for inviting me to this great conversation, for your wonderful work, Kyle, in advancing the story of the world's greatest seminary, and for all of the ways in which you all are helping all of us be responsive messengers of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Kyle:** How has your thinking about leadership formation changed over time?

**Bishop Brown:** One of the ways in which I have changed my thinking, and in some ways, my praying, and my feeling about leadership in these last 14 months. I was elected in February of 2019, ordained in June of 2019, and began my work as the diocesan Bishop of Maine on the 23rd of June. I had my first diocesan convention in October, was driving all over Maine, was on track to get to every one of our churches, and then, of course, the coronavirus came.

When I think about leadership and leadership formation, I can't help but to think about those things, of course. What I'm experiencing is having to really bone up on and emphasize the gifts of compassion, and the gifts of understanding and listening. Understanding the pressures of the current moment, understanding that lay and clergy leaders alike are learning. For some of our folk at a pace, they've never known.

I would say for me, Kyle, the biggest learning right now is emphasizing the need to take care and leaning into those tremendous values of being compassionate, listening more, leaning into the values of compassion, of listening, and of honoring the fact that we are all learning at a very rapid rate and to both celebrate that and to be patient.

**Kyle:** Thank you so much for that. That's certainly resonating with me, and I suspect with others. I'm curious, against that challenging backdrop of the events of the early days of your episcopate, we're curious to hear some stories, and maybe some stories of hope, from stories you've heard from seminarians, or from recent graduates or from new leaders

**Bishop Brown:** One of the great places where I feel hopeful from new leaders, especially people who have graduated recently from one of our seminaries, is this complete comfort with technology. One story I'll tell is a person who's actually in the low residency program at CDSP. And the platform that CDSP uses, now the college for bishops is also using that platform.

What I heard was that being in Boston did not in any way take away from this seminarian sense of being formed in a faith community, of being nurtured, and of learning a really rigorous curriculum. That's one story. Another story is about the way in which our church continues to embrace being inclusive. That's been a value of ours for a long time. The comfort that we are getting to be around folks whose gender identity is fluid, or who might be trans, that's a huge hopeful piece for me.

We have a Rector, who serves here in Maine, who came to us from the South. They had never lived in the North, not to mention Maine. They have plural pronouns. They have taught us a tremendous amount, in the course of just a couple of months, in a really beautiful and great way. I feel like those are two hopeful things, one about technology, and one about inclusion, that tell me that seminarians are pushing us in this great way and loving those of us who might be older, or those of us who may not have as much facility with technology, or those of us who continue to get pushed in ways to open the doors of our hearts and open the doors of the gospel to everybody.

Finally, Kyle, I would say something about the way in which seminarians are teaching me about how change is accelerating at a very fast pace. I love to learn, and I love when people who have skills and ideas different from mine are pushing and leading me.

**Kyle:** In quite a few of the cases you just mentioned. You mentioned an nudge or a push from folks helping to lead the way on some of these issues. Of course, you mentioned that in some cases what once seemed optional has become a requirement, but we know that that doesn't make it a given that a community will respond in a creative or gracious or forward-looking way.

How have you seen those nudges, those pushes lived out among those leaders in a way that is both effective, helping the change to come in, but also presumably helps to bring folks along, a sort of pragmatism and a grace? How is that sort of looked?

**[00:11:09] Brown:** One of the ways in which this change looks in Maine is that I get to serve with really tremendous diocesan staff colleagues. On the 15th of March, which was a Sunday, I was scheduled to be at one of our churches called St. Columba's in Boothbay Harbor, and on Friday the 13th, it was really clear that going to this church was just not a good idea.

The next week diocesan staff were responding and saying, "We need to think about gathering everybody we know. What if we did a town hall? We'll do a town hall this Tuesday."

We immediately set up shop to expand our Zoom account. So we now do a weekly town hall with almost every leader in the diocese of Maine, every clergy person, every parish administrator, every member of standing committee, every member of diocesan council, every trustee of diocesan funds, every senior warden, every junior warden, every treasure and now we've added convention delegates to that group. Some weeks it's over 300 people-

**Kyle:** Wow.

**Brown:** -who are gathering, learning and praying and being the Church. Some of our folks in Maine are experiencing deeper connection with each other now than they did before the pandemic, because they're looking on the screen at Zoom, and they can see faces and they can see names, so they're making connections that they didn't use to.

We typically ended with compline, and so there was ample time to lift up intercessions, and then we find out later that people are emailing, or texting, or discovering ways to continue to check in about those prayers. Tremendous community is happening.

I feel like, at least in the diocese of Maine, it's folk who are connected to a learning community, including and especially seminaries, who are the ones who are helping us do this work the most and reminding us that our context in Maine is particular and unique. It doesn't make us better, but it means that we get to turn locally and discover resources that we have right now.

For example, there are a number of indigenous people whose cry for racial justice has been around for decades, and now we get to hear that, and those of us who are white, and those of us who have power get to respond in a way maybe that we haven't. I feel like in the church here, it's our seminarians and recent graduates who are especially helping us do that.

**Kyle:** That's so helpful. Thank you. For this next question, I want to invite you to think big, a creative, fun sort of question. Think about if you were to commission, or maybe you want to team-teach, some kind of a special topics course and you could invite any instructor for today's seminarians, any instructor, any topic, who would you invite to teach, and what would you have them teach?

**Brown:** I want to say something sort of tongue in cheek first. The first thing I would do if I could design some kind of a learning program for people preparing particularly for clergy leadership and worship leadership in our church, I would find a way to get Professor Louis Weil to do all kinds of videos right now before he goes to his reward, so that clergy in future generations can sit at the feet of this giant whose way and whose teaching I use every day.

Every time I step into a church to lead worship, I feel like Professor Weil is there in a beautiful and great way. I don't mean in any way to speak about Louis as if he is already dead. I simply mean to suggest that I don't think there is a liturgical scholar who has influenced our understanding of the current prayer book more than he has. I see the difference between people who have gone to CDSP and studied with him and people who haven't.

That's one thing. In a more serious and real way, part of what I think about and dream about is how can particular seminary communities leverage and work with monastic communities so that we are learning how to pray, so that people who are coming out of seminary have 21st-century tools and ancient practices?

I think that somehow if I could design a course or design a January-term or longer, I would gather all of the professed religious in the Episcopal Church, bring them to CDSP, and/or use Zoom, and our professed religious, could create learning and practice, not just for seminarians, but for our whole church so that CDSP, for example, would become a destination for people who want to learn how to pray.

I have this great dream that we would integrate our great academic rigor with this ancient way of prayer and that our sisters and brothers and siblings who are professed religious have a whole lot to teach us right now.

**Kyle:** Let's talk about changes you might make in how people are formed. We elected never to start with this question because that can set a certain tone in a conversation like this. Nevertheless, we want to think seriously about what seminaries or other institutions and structures of leadership formation. If you could make one change to our various interlocking systems that you think would make a positive difference for the Episcopal Church, I'm wondering what that change might be.

**Bishop Brown:** I don't know that this is so much a change as it is a desire for a renewed emphasis, which has to do with our relationships with Jesus Christ. I was recently at a church, online here in Maine, and a woman asked me to speak about my relationship with Jesus, and I did that. Then I asked her to do that, and she did. Later, I got an email from the rector, who said that he didn't know how to do that, that he was deeply moved by his parishioner's testimony and witness, and that he himself has never been asked to speak about Jesus in the way that he heard his parishioner do that.

I think there is tremendous opportunity for us to teach each other and witness and listen to one another as we speak about the power of Jesus Christ to change our lives, that the notion that we don't have as many tools to be evangelical with a small 'e.' I think that's true, and I think that it's not always been our first charism. I really hope that we might explore ways to make that something that we're known for.

We're known for witnessing to the power of Jesus Christ to bring us from death to life, and that we can tell stories about that, that are real, that don't put people off, but simply reveal the truth of transformation in each of our lives. I don't think it's a change as much as it is a desire to explore how we can renew this beautifully

ancient truth, which is that through our baptism, Jesus Christ lives in us and is continually leading us both to the cross into the empty tomb.

**Kyle:** I'm so struck by the honesty and the vulnerability of that clergy person who worked with you and said that.

I'm wondering, what advice you might share with others who resonate with that longing, and that observation, and want to go deeper? Where would you advise them to start?

**Bishop Brown:** One of the places I think to start in coming to have a story about Jesus's capacity and ongoing presence to change us, if someone hasn't yet done that or isn't quite sure about that, I think it's really helpful to think about putting to one side all of our intellectual defenses, or our reasons why. Why language about salvation through Jesus Christ is something we don't do. I think there's a first step in taking the plunge, taking the risk, trusting in grace, that I can put away my suspicions.

I can put away my defenses. I can put away my intellectual arguments that might be socially acceptable in a diverse crowd of interfaith folk, and say, "Well, I go to church and it's really important community, but I'm not really sure about how I feel about Jesus." Instead of leading with those statements, that if we can somehow suggest, "I'm going to spend a season, not saying those things, and instead, I'm going to practice, just in small ways, to speak about ways that I desire or I long for the truth that Jesus is leading me from death to life."

Sometimes I think this is not so much about something technical as it is expressing hope, desire, willingness to actually try this on.

**Kyle:** That's beautiful. Thank you. To wrap up here, we just like to invite any other thoughts or advice that you might have for a seminary that is very much contemplating its future role and its future mission. What else is on your mind, that should be on our mind?

**Bishop Brown:** I think one of the things that CDSP has always done, and I think is doing in a bigger and better way, is to understand its identity and its reach as much bigger than Province 8.

There's something for me in CDSP's partnership with Trinity, or Trinity's support of our great school. It seems to me that there's even more opportunity now to think about Africa. I think about Trinity's long association with churches in Africa. I think about Trinity's long association in support of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Church Divinity School of the Pacific, I think has some opportunities that again, I don't think it diminishes the other Episcopal seminaries, but there's a chance for CDSP to stand up tall in a way that maybe we haven't been able to because of our scarcity of resources. I'm not speaking about size in matriculation but to be bigger in who CDSP thinks of itself.

**Kyle:** I really appreciate your perspective there and I'm excited to see that trajectory unfailing. Bishop Brown, thank you so much for your time and willingness to share your wisdom and your perspectives on CDSP and the Episcopal church.

**Bishop Brown:** You are so welcome and thank you for this invitation and for this great opportunity to share stories.

**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)