



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 and I am here with our two guests for today's conversation. The Reverend Gay Clark Jennings, president of the House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church. Welcome president Jennings.

The Reverend Gay Clark Jennings: Thank you.

Kyle: And Dr. Scott MacDougall, associate professor of theology at CDSP. Welcome Dr. MacDougall.

Dr. Scott MacDougall: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Kyle: Well, thank you both for being willing to have this conversation about theology in the House of Deputies. To kick us off, I want to ask president Jennings to-- for those who might not know what the House of Deputies is, can you give us an overview of its roles and duties?

Jennings: I'd be glad to. At the very beginning of the founding of our church, a decision was made by our founders to do something that was actually quite radical in the church world around the world, and that was that everyone was going to have a place at the table. that we were committed to shared governance, and what that means is that we distribute authority so that bishops, clergy, and lay people have an equal role in the governance of the church.

How that plays out is at general convention, which is the highest temporal authority of the Episcopal Church. Note, I said, temporal authority, and we have two houses. It's no surprise that the Episcopal Church was founded around the same time as the founding

of the United States of America. So we have the House of Bishops where every Bishop is seated and the presiding Bishop is the presiding officer of the House of Bishops.

And we have the House of Deputies, and in the House of Deputies, every diocese has the right to elect up to eight deputies, four lay people and four clergy to serve as deputies, and any act of general convention, be it the budget, resolution, policy, changing or amending our constitution and canons, has to be by concurrent action of the two houses.

Some months ago, I was told that as the president of the House of Deputies, I should stay in my governance lane and leave the mission to others, which of course is a false dichotomy because governance is always the servant of mission. My role as president is to help deputies and alternate deputies to take their appropriate role in the governance of the church. It's really important for deputies to understand that their role is far more than attending a meeting once every three years.

In order to be clear that governance is a servant of mission, we have to understand that governance is fundamentally, at its core, a spiritual and a theological act, and then all of a sudden, because of this random conversation I had with somebody, the light bulb went off, and I thought, "You know what? The House of Deputies has a chaplain, the Reverend Lester McKenzie from the diocese of Los Angeles. The House of Deputies needs a theologian", and I had spent a January term at Church Divinity School of the Pacific in 2019, and I knew right away who the person was that I wanted to serve in that role, and it's the first time we've ever had a theologian of the House of Deputies.

Kyle: Thank you so much for launching this conversation in a rich way with that context and the backstory. Dr. MacDougall, can I ask, what was it like to get this invitation and what attracted you to this opportunity?

MacDougall: Well, I can't overstate what an honor it was to be asked to do that. For me, the yes was easy because theology for me is a second career in some ways, and when I decided to stop the trajectory that I was on and go back to graduate school to study this discipline, the very reason that I did that was because I had a goal of giving back to the church by steeping myself in the theology of my tradition and in serving the church by forming new leaders for that tradition, by hopefully teaching in the seminary, which I've been blessed to be able to do, much to my wonderful satisfaction and happiness, and also to give back to the church.

Because I felt I had received so much in my own formation from deeply theologically sophisticated clergy who understood that lay people should be equipped with the skills of theological discernment and to contribute to the upbuilding of the church for the betterment of the entire body. That theology isn't something that's done only by a kind of well-educated class that has custody of that particular capacity, but it's something that should be done by all.

That is the genius of the dispersed authority with which the Anglican tradition has understood church governance since its founding. I think that's a really important component of who we are and our distinct identity. When I was asked, would you as a lay theologian in the Episcopal Church like to serve as an inaugural theologian to the House of Deputies? The answer was just a foregone conclusion. Of course I would.

I think it's very important to be a lay theologian doing that work for other lay people to empower their imagination about the role of lay theologizing in the church. And also, I think it's important to model for clergy the importance of building up the theological capacity of those they serve rather than acting as a theological delivery system for the supplying of theology to those in the pews, which is not the way to think about it, I don't think. I think that's very limiting.

Jennings: I would just echo what Scott just said. Scott's written about hope and here's something he wrote, and this was one of the deciding factors for me. He wrote "maintaining hope in the eschatological future of God, the promised coming of the kingdom that Jesus preached, empowers us to work now with God to create conditions that look more rather than less like the promised kingdom of liberation, joy, and life."

Isn't that the choice that we're called to make time and time again as the baptized members of Christ's body, to choose hope and not death, which seems particularly poignant right now in our history? Choose hope and be free to live centered in Christ. Choose hope and be part of the coming of the kingdom. People say, How does that connect to general convention?

General convention, again, as I said, the highest temporal authority in the Episcopal Church, participates in that same work, bringing hope and working with God now to create conditions that look like the promised kingdom and encourage us to live Christ-centered lives, both individually and collectively. That's what general convention is. General convention is not just some, "Oh, boy, I get to go to Baltimore or wherever, for 10 days or 8 days." Rather, "I get to go to Baltimore and be part of working to bring hope to the church and to the world." It's no small thing.

MacDougall: Thank you for that, Gay. I'm glad that was a component in your decision because I am really committed to shaping an imagination of what we do as Christians that is not afraid-- that death is not the worst thing in the world, that death is not the thing to be fearful of, it's inauthenticity and it's apostasy that we should be afraid of. When we are governing the church and doing the work of setting policy, I think sometimes we've bought our own narrative of decline such that we're so afraid that we're going to die, that we lose sight of what's really important and we operate out of a sense of anxiety and fear.

Maybe well-founded anxiety and fear, given numbers and statistics and financial figures and projections, and so forth, and so on. I'm certainly not advocating for us to ignore facts. That's not what I'm saying. What I would argue is the work of the Holy Spirit is bigger than those facts and that we are a people who believes that life is snatched out

of the jaws of death and that we should live that way every day and therefore, shouldn't govern the church out of a sense of fear or scarcity or lack of nerve or pulling back from telling the truth and all of the things that are very, very difficult.

Rather, we should embrace our hope. We should embrace our strength as people who are empowered to deliver the message of life to the world. The more deeply we live into that, the more that will attract people to us by being a people of life and of light and therefore, our hope, as a beacon, very much in line with what this season of epiphany says is true about Zion attracting the nations, will bring people streaming to the church if we live like the people of life and hope and love that the gospel commands that we do.

Too often, I feel that we see our leaders too anxious, and we don't need to govern out of anxiety. We need to govern out of the vision for the future, a vision of hope and a vision of love. Again, if I can contribute to a shift in theological imagination among those who are doing that really important work to embrace life and keep the threat of death and the fear and anxiety about death in its place, then we would have a better balance for how we move into the future from a footing of fullness and abundance rather than a sense of mourning loss and anxiety about what appears to be slipping away.

Kyle: That so helpful, Scott. I'm so appreciative to both of you for weaving this image of governance and theology and mission as this integrative whole that's governing what we do when we talk about here today, so let's make that a little more concrete for our listeners and have some conversation. Gay, you mentioned now. [chuckles] What are some theological questions that the House of Deputies and both of you in your work together are grappling with right now?

Jennings: I'm going to defer to the theologian of the House of Deputies to provide the first go at that question.

MacDougall: As I understand it from President Jennings, the thing that we really need to be working on first together is to understand more clearly, and this is work I really look forward to doing as an ecclesialogist. I study the church theologically as my main focus of my constructive theological work. I do that through a lens of eschatology, through a lens of looking at the future and hope. As an ecclesialogist, it's really crucial for me that I'm going to be able to engage in these processes at the level of the national church for the first time and see this work taking place at this scale, which is going to be very exciting and so I'll be learning a lot too and I'm very excited about that.

So my theological questions that are engaging me is, my theological intuition and the historical consensuses, of course, and theological analysis is that our dispersed authority is a theological imperative. There is a theological reason why, having to do with the way the Spirit pours gifts out on all the members of the body, that discovering how that works out in practice is going to be very, very important, as I both help the body of the deputies see that that's the role that they're playing through the work that we

do with workshops and conversations and however President Jennings wants to create those interactions, conversations, documents, whatever it may be.

That's a big theological question for me, is how do we get people doing the work of church governance to expand their theological imagination of what they're doing and what they're involved in, such that thinking of governance in those terms, and therefore governing in those terms during that eight to 10 days is a Spirit-filled activity and one that is done out of a spirit of joy and fellowship or communion with one another within the House of Deputies, but also with the House of Bishops, and with a sense of their communion with the other members of the Episcopal Church nationwide, and then of course with an eye toward the larger Anglican Communion in which we're embedded.

The relational realities that shape the realities of the Episcopal Church and its decision making, understanding that in its theological dimensions is a real pressing need as well. When theologically speaking, there needs to be a bifurcated vision of what we're doing when we do church administration, so both the highest possible global levels of the church and also individual parishes, all the way down to individual parishes, remain in view.

When you're making these decisions, you're thinking all the time about the implications of a various piece of legislation or policy for the relational possibilities that are opened or foreclosed on by a particular action. That's theological. Is this building up or is this tearing down? Is this giving life or is this taking away some possibility for the existence of unexpected life that we would not have seen otherwise or may not come into reality otherwise? That's the very difficult work of discernment, another important category for doing this work of judgment.

Kyle: Dr. MacDougall, you've given us this picture of work intended to develop members of the houses and alternates imagination about the work that they're doing as connected to the theological imagination of the church and the mission of the church. There's some theology of what we're doing here in governance. President Jennings, what are we doing right now? [laughs] What's the theological agenda?

Jennings: Let me just note one thing that Dr. MacDougall said that President Jennings will be influenced by Dr. MacDougall. That's part of the reason and he'll be serving on my council of advice. Let me just take a contemporary example. The intersection of our faith and political life in the country right now. It's on everyone's minds. In the next month or so, I've asked Scott to consider putting something together that will help deputies and alternates think about what is happening because it's not going to be over this week or next week.

Kyle: Let me note that we're recording this on January 11th, 2021.

Jennings: Yes. This will not be over. How do we as deputies think about this, especially in light of the fact that there are some who say that the Episcopal Church should not be involved in social issues? There are others for whom it's a deep and abiding

commitment and passion, but the fact is whatever we do, whether we say something or nothing, we are making a public witness. How does our theology-- making public policy, which we end up doing, we make church policy at general convention, is doing theology.

How will our theology influence what we do between now and general convention and what we do at general convention? In fact, our Office of Government Relations of the Episcopal Church, which they do a phenomenal job, their work, not of lobbying, but rather of advocacy, is solely based on what is adopted by the general convention. That is what they do for the three or, in this case, four years between general convention.

When we enact a bill, when we adopt a resolution, when we say this is the Episcopal Church's policy, it's not just left on the floor of either house when we leave that city, but rather, it gets into our system in terms of who we say we are as a church and what our public witness is to the country and to each other within the confines of the church. I expect a lot of activity and a lot of different issues between now and July of 2022 when we finally hopefully are able to gather in person in Baltimore.

MacDougall: The vision of Anglican political theology is deep and vigorous and concrete and carries a legacy of positive change that has shaped and formed in positive, and sometimes negative, ways the countries in which the Anglican Church has been present for literally centuries. There's no reason for us to shy away from that legacy, rather, we should be embracing it. That said, one of the things that's really important to me is for us to remember why we do that work.

If we just look at another social pressure group, or an advocacy organization, and people begin to wonder, what's the difference between the Episcopal Church and a political party or the Sierra Club. There's a big difference between a church and any other kind of a nonprofit organization that makes advocacy in the public sphere. We need to claim that. We may have common cause with that. After all, I also do teach community organizing, in its theological dimensions, and I understand about strategic allyships with organizations of common concern and that sort of thing, but we are also different.

Those differences are differences that matter and they're theological differences because that's the vision we're asking people to catch and to carry forward. Human rights can be caught by being a member of Amnesty International, and there's nothing wrong with Amnesty International, I think it's a great organization, but we have something different than that.

The church offers a way in which one can align one's entire life moving through the world in a way that further God's vision for flourishing, and that's unique. That's a unique gift that we have to offer. I don't want us to downplay that gift or to hide that light under a bushel. I want it to be out for the world to see. Again, it's a way to attract people to the beauty that is the Christian way lived Christianly.

Kyle: President Jennings, I'm wondering if you could comment on that with respect maybe to a particular issue that the House has spoken to some time? This might require a little thinking, but can you think of an example of a place where that twofold image of what is the church's theology in connection to this area of discernment? Then, what is the public situation we're speaking into? Have you seen that dynamic at work in how the House's approach to its work? Does this question make sense?

Jennings: Yes, it makes sense. Cuba comes to mind immediately. As many know at the last general convention, the two Houses voted unanimously, I believe, to admit Cuba to reunify with the Diocese of Cuba, which had been part of the Episcopal Church, and because of the revolution in Cuba, that relationship was almost entirely severed, although there were below ground relationships. In terms of our theology, one of the things, and I always get a little nervous talking theology in front of a theology professor because I graduated from seminary in 1977 and Owen Thomas a long time ago. He was my intro to theology professor.

One piece of our theological understanding of what it means to be Church is what it means to be one. What does our theology and our faith say about unity, about becoming unified? I think we're reading John right now "that they all may be one just as the Father and I are one." There was clear theological reason for the Episcopal Church to be reunified with the Diocese of Cuba. In terms of public opinion, it was divided. Well, those communists. There was debate.

There were certainly arguments in some parts of the government that to have that kind of relationship with Cuba was politically fraught, and perhaps we ought to wait. We were even given that communication in some ways, but we made a choice as a church. We've studied, of course, that's brilliant, we studied it. We had committees. At the end of all of it, what mattered was our relationship with our Cuban siblings. That's what drove the reunification, was that desire to be one even in spite of some political reasons perhaps not to proceed.

MacDougall: When we do the work, even when it's risky, of reinstating relationships, reconciling relationships that have gone sour or that have fallen by the wayside or haven't been nurtured for whatever reason to the extent they ought to be, reconciliation is a crucial theological imperative that does do the work of directing us towards something that looks more like the kingdom of God than not. Doesn't bring the kingdom of God. Only God brings the kingdom of God, but it brings us closer to something that looks more like it rather than less.

When the Episcopal Church is in deeper communion with our fellow Anglicans in Cuba, we're all better for it. We're all enhanced. God's mission is enhanced. The possibilities that open up from those connections, things that you would never have thought possible, new emergences, here and there and elsewhere because of those connections, that's all part of the economy of grace as Catherine Tanner would put it, that is really important for us to plug into and be part of.

I think that is a good example of the kind of thing that we need to be looking at. Where do we recognize the possibilities for other reconciliation? Where do we find other relationships that need repair? Where do we find that grace has been damned and there's a place that we can break it open and start the free flow of gifts and exchange again? Those are the kinds of theological discernments that we'll be doing as a general convention. That's what brings resolutions and legislation to the floor to begin with. That's what impels them to come forward.

Jennings: And Dr. MacDougall's comments just now demonstrate exactly why we needed a theologian for the House of Deputies.

MacDougall: I really really look forward to this work. It's going to be exciting, and just to be selfish, it certainly is a fulfillment of a dream of mine so I'm really really looking forward to it.

Kyle: Thank you both so much. This conversation has been really rich and interesting. Anything either of you wants to add before we close?

MacDougall: Just thank you and you we'll be praying for the work of the convention as it moves towards its meeting and during this time together. It's so important and it's not just an administrative matter, it's a really really rich relational matter that needs our care, our respect and attention and resourcing.

Kyle: Okay. Thank you very much. As you say we'll be praying for the General Convention in the days ahead.

MacDougall: Thank you.

Jennings: Thank you. Thank you both.

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