



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 Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows of the Diocese of Indianapolis. Bishop Jennifer, thanks so much for being with us.

Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows: It's great to be with you. Thanks, Kyle.

Kyle: We're having a conversation today about the future of leadership formation. I thought as a way to begin that, we could talk about maybe how your vision as a bishop now of the diocese for a number of years, maybe how your vision of leadership formation has changed in the time that you've been in your current role.

Bishop Jennifer: It's an interesting question. I would say there's been an evolution, a slow one. I feel blessed that I've had a number of years to think about this, having-- I went through my own discernment and ordination process 20-- Wait a minute. Well, I started it actually like 1992 so it feels like a long time ago, I started thinking about these things. Then when I became bishop, what I found myself doing is relying on all this accumulated knowledge and experience and trying to shape a process that I felt would be able to be responsive to what I was discerning as the ministry needs of our time today.

A lot of those discernments have brought me to some tried and true disciplines and ideas about how do we form people, which is mostly about really making space for people to be able to discover how God might be calling them into lay and ordained ministries and providing them with the appropriate formation opportunity to help them grow into that vocation. As bishop, I've never taken a one-size-fits-all paradigm as the way for us to make these discernments. Everyone who comes into the Episcopal Church is coming from such a variety of backgrounds, and the calls to vocations are all very different.

Luckily, our seminaries and formation institutions are varied, much more varied than they've ever been so that it provides an opportunity to respond in a number of ways. Helping to see where ministry is happening, being ignited in the hearts of people around the diocese, and providing experience, and watching folks step into that ministry on the ground before they enter discernment has been probably the biggest shift, instead of proactively looking for people to be brought into ministry. It's one of our mission pillars to develop leaders, lay and ordained, for the church of today and tomorrow.

We're always looking and always hoping to provide environments of ministry that are vital in following Christ in their communities, but also ones that help people to discern more deeply their calls.

Kyle: You talked about some tried and true practices. Concretely, what does it look like to encourage an individual to look at that? I imagine people have a certain image in some cases of what ministry might look like. How do you encourage them to make that connection between God's call for them and the discernment? Does that question make sense?

Bishop Jennifer: I think so. Let me try it this way. When I was being called into ordained ministry, I was really active in my congregation and was then being invited to do more things. Before I ever discerned a call to ordination really, as an exercise of meeting with the priest and going through the official discernment process, I taught confirmation classes. I taught various Christian education classes as a lay leader who was also active in doing other kinds of ministries. I was asked to preach. There was just these invitations to be playful with the kinds of ministries that are possible in the church, and that experience helped me to discern before I began an official discernment process.

When I became bishop, I encountered individuals who wanted to discern ministry, but had not had the experience of actually exploring what that might be like, particularly for ordained ministry, or whether it was the deacons or priests, I thought, "Well, what is it like to walk with another person in their Christian journey through a Christian formation class? What is it like to preach a five-minute homily at an evening prayer service?" That's a lot of institutional trying things on, but I think that alongside watching someone explore their faith and watch how they might gather a community when they're doing other things outside of the institutional church are important indicators.

We're not just looking for good folks who are faithfully coming to church, but who have the opportunity to go deeper. Many folks have found that their call is not necessarily to ordained ministry, but to all kinds of lay ministries that they never would have considered previously because the only option that was put before them was ordination. Developing leaders, and everyone's got the capacity to do something I think, and it's being invitational about that.

Kyle: It sounds like a vision that acknowledges that people are always on this path of formation and that the institutional words we put on it is secondary to the journey that people are on, it sounds like.

Bishop Jennifer: Yes. I just think the church, thankfully, is rediscovering that lifelong formation, which is a term we've had for a long time, but what does that mean for a community to take that seriously and to be taking ongoing discipling seriously in the Episcopal Church? Now we're saying no, to be followers of Jesus means that we're constantly being formed and reformed into the mind and likeness of Christ.

That requires all kinds of explorations. Some of them might lead to seminary, some of them might lead to deeper engagements in the community, out on the protest line. There are lots of different ways to step into formation.

Kyle: Thank you. I wonder if we might invite you to share a couple of stories. I'm curious about stories you've heard, maybe from seminarians, maybe from recent graduates, maybe from other new leaders, whatever may make sense. What are some stories from new leaders that you're hearing that are making you hopeful for the future of the church?

Bishop Jennifer: If I told you that I've been having this conversation all day, I hope you would believe me, but literally, formation, the future of the church, new leaders and seminaries, this has been what I've been talking about for about four hours today. It's right on time because just yesterday, this is the story I told you earlier today, I referenced a meeting with a fairly newly ordained priest. He's been priest less than three years, a recent graduate from a seminary, and he's finding himself in a job that places him both in the very large and active parish, and also starting a new ministry in the community. They have not quite a fresh expression, but an attempt at trying to be in the community in a different way.

That effort was started a year ago, he's in the second year of doing this ministry or so. He's like, "The world has changed with the pandemic. We're finally able to talk about dismantling white supremacy. There are people on the streets demonstrating. There's people on the streets. There's just a lot of stuff going on right now in September 2020." We talked about how's it going, we check in once a year. He said, "There's--" He feels both prepared for this moment and yet nothing could prepare it but the foundational pieces that are the real formative work of what does it mean to follow Jesus and to be nimble about that, have continued to start from while.

He worked full-time while he went to seminary. It was really, really hard, he had to juggle a lot of things, raising his family. There's something about the complexity of moving through seminary formation in that way, which makes him able to step into the current moment that he might not have anticipated. It's a hard thing to do, to work full-time and go to seminary and commute. Anyone who's done it knows it's really difficult and you don't have the luxuries that sometimes you might have as a residential seminary student, but he does know how to be nimble, and to think quick, and to build relationships across difference, and to juggle very often competing allegiances in terms of parish and community ministry.

I'm finding more stories like that to be once they give me hope because the reality is ordaining people to sit in church offices all day and iron altar linens enough for eucharist only, that's just not what we're up for. It's never been the call for the church really, but we have slid into that over the previous decades. Now, we're awakening to

some new realities that I hope the Episcopal Church can step into the way this fairly new priest is managing to do.

Kyle: Any other stories top of mind from?

Bishop Jennifer: Yes. I'll tell a little story about this other individual who's a postulant. He may be bi-vocational, we'll see, but he is the principal at a huge middle school in the Indianapolis City School System. This place is massive. It's got this big campus and a couple of thousand students and I spent a couple of hours with him just to see what he does, supporting postulants in ministry. I'm like, "Well, show me how you spend part of your day." He's toured me around the school, we went through lunch hour with all the junior high students doing what they do, and he's an administrator, and he's bilingual. He's Latino. He showed me these pastoral gifts that were just stunning to watch on display in this position that he holds.

He's also very devoted and active in his congregation. It's had to discern a call to ordained ministry that's been with them for a very long time. I thought, "Okay, here's someone who seems to be very integrated." His sense of vocation is fully realized in many ways in his work as a principal at a school. I pray that, God willing, he's ordained, he'll be able to use the gifts that he shows forth, both at the church and in the school in a really complementary way that he doesn't have to shelf one.

Kyle: Since you mentioned an example of someone, maybe they're going to be bi-vocational. I wonder if we could talk for just a minute about-- I know that's a hot, controversial word in some of these conversations about the future of leadership bi-vocational.

Bishop Jennifer: Really? That's a controversial word?

Kyle: Well, I get the sense that there are a lot of folks out there-- Maybe I'm elevating a Twitter discourse to more importance than it deserves, but I know there's a fair bit of pushback that the solution to the future of church leadership is that clergy are going to have day jobs. I'm curious what your vision for how bi-vocational leaders, how that fits into your vision of ministry, and in your context?

Bishop Jennifer: I just think it's one of the options for discerning a call and it has been. Part of it, it's a personal thing. When I was in the ordination process at Trinity in New York City, I was told that I should expect to be bi-vocational. It's not just that the priest or deacon is bi-vocational, but the whole church is bi-vocational. We all have a vocation that's in the world and in the sanctuary and we live them out differently.

The question really is about, when people wonder about that, it's about the compensation issues that get raised with compensating clergy the way the Episcopal Church typically has done it. There will always, I think, be those called to full-time ministry within the institutional church and some, for whatever reason, may not be able to do that and we'll have their compensation coming from other channels. I don't think that makes the vocation to the-- It doesn't dilute the vocation to ordained ministry. The question is how do we make room for all of the ways there was to

provide sacramental and ecclesiastical leadership in our congregations and other settings.

Kyle: Thank you. For this next question, I'd love to invite you to think big, sky's the limit, people to have some fun with this one. Thinking of a creative course or a needed course, if your job was to commission, or maybe team-teach, if you want to think about it that way, commission a course for today's seminarians, any topic and any instructor, any instructor in the world, who would you want to invite to teach and what?

Bishop Jennifer: Living or dead?

Here's what I wish I had. I had a great seminary education, CDSP, and all that, but if I were to construct a dream course about making-- Oh, man, I don't know what I would call it, but I would love a class where I could get Verna Dozier, blessed memory, and Louis Weil and Barbara Harris in a room to just to talk about ministry and the sacramental nature of ministry in the church and the world. I think someone like Verna Dozier could do the kinds of teaching I think is helpful in a seminary context about really lifting up the notion of what it means to support the ministry of the baptized.

Louis Weil, whose teaching I rely on every day around the robust nature of some the sacraments and how we're called forth to be-- what's the word? I don't want to use robust again, but to really be lavish in our use and exploration of those sacraments and make sure that they relate to actual life and not just fussy things that we do in the sanctuary. That they're really related to life in ministry.

Then Barbara Harris, who I think it's one of the best practical theologians we've had a lot of time to help us understand what the implications are for just everyday people and taking all of that as a way of helping to do the work of repairing the breach, which is, I think what the gospel commands us to do, which is to work with Jesus to repair and reconcile the world.

With those three perspectives for laying ordained, like what does it really mean to help create communities that can be about that work? Those are three people I can pick up at the top that I would love to be in conversation with. I don't know what books they would have on the syllabus. They might not even have books, but you put them all in the room and I guarantee you over the course of a semester, folks will learn a lot, and perhaps there would be some kind of practicum that went with it, where people were having to wrestle with the things that come up in those lectures and then go out into a ministry setting or on the streets. Make something of it.

Kyle: Yes, I like that. That's like an interdisciplinary view of thinking about ministry. So often we got the boxes of our disciplines and having that chance to step back and think across the boxes a little.

We did want to ask folks we've invited to these conversations about a change we might make in leadership formation in the church. As you survey the landscape,

what's one thing you would want to change about how we do things, whatever you want to think about that would make a positive difference for the church?

Bishop Jennifer: If I've got my big magic wand, if I could do anything, I think-- Wow, I don't know. There's a lot of ways I could go with that question, Kyle. I think about how to help people have experiences that put them in places where they have to be different and be with people who are really different. The thing I think about most around leadership and growth in the church have to do with how we, as an Episcopal Church, have a pretty narrow idea about what it means to be a church, to worship as a church, and to understand what's "good church" in my little air quotes.

I think anything we can do to expand people's experience, whatever it is they're coming from, is really crucial. One example, we've always had kinds of potential experiences where people had to do, at CDSP back in the day, a multicultural experience. I remember arguing that I don't need a multicultural experience. I'm a black woman at a West Coast seminary that's majority white, here I am. This is my multicultural experience, but I had to learn some things about, well, no, actually it is different. How about you go to El Salvador for a couple of weeks and learn how to be in a different culture. It shifted everything I thought I ever knew about New York City where I grew up.

I went back and embraced and began to learn about things that I would not have even considered because, I don't know, I just wasn't compelled to do it. That multicultural experience helped me.

Leadership development, I think that's a key piece of being a leader that we don't talk about a lot, but because in our Episcopal Church, we have such stratifications and divisions by race and class, the class one is the biggest one. We are not able to really show up in the ways we might want to in terms of our witness to Christ. If we're going to have a church in the future, we have to have leaders who are not afraid of entering into other spaces, being uncomfortable in those spaces, and growing and learning from those experiences. Learning to be willing to pick up and go where God might send you.

If I had a magic wand, I'd want to be able to just say, "You know what, I just need to take this priest or the student and put them over here and be able to make it work," because of course, there are always kinds of complications. I just remember when I was on staff at CDSP hearing people say, "Well, I feel called to the priesthood, but I only feel called to this County, in the entire country, like right here." I thought, "Oh my gosh, like we can't. God is so much broader."

There's a parochialism I want us to overcome. Leadership development, particularly in our church, I think, has to do with helping people get comfortable and conversant and not just tolerating, but learning to embrace all kinds of differences. Then when we say we welcome you, we can really affect that.

Kyle: Yes. Oh, definitely. I think I hear you saying that immersion is one way to do that. It sounds like you've had an immersion experience that was powerful. I'm wondering about other-- If we don't have a magic wand, but we can give people

some advice about where and how to show up for their learning. What other advice would you give folks about developing that leadership characteristic?

Bishop Jennifer: The way I talk about folks needing to inspect their circles, when we were talking about dismantling systemic racism, people will say, Oh my gosh, it's so softball light. You're telling people to think about where they spend their time. There are these really easy things.

I think those are questions we need to be thinking about as leaders because those are places where every day we can form different kinds of relationships across difference which don't require immersing yourself in a different language and culture, but maybe helps learn how to form relationships with people who are a different class or a different ethnicity, country of origin.

One of the stories I tell often is when I was in Syracuse, I had a couple of folks who've worked at the University, Syracuse University. One was a Methodist Chaplain, another was an administrator in international affairs. We had children who were about the same age, like under one-year-old or so. We said, let's get together for Sunday dinner. We made a commitment for a year before I moved to Chicago, where we met for Sunday dinner because we said we want to form a community where we and our kids get to explore other people.

There were ethnic differences. One of the couples was from Kurdistan. Another was Anglo. There's Harrison and I, he's Bohemian and I'm a black, African American. We ate each other's foods. We were in each other's houses. We met each other's parents. When the parents came over from the old country, she didn't speak English. We learned how to-- we had an experience of being in knowing each other at a deep level. That was one way I thought, "Well, my goodness, I don't think I knew a lot about their country, but I know a lot about it now. I can think about it and inquire about it in different ways and struggle with what it means to be uncomfortable with not being able to communicate with the ease that I'm used to."

That I think is a formative experience that could pay dividends in terms of being a leader who then is not afraid to step into another circumstance for, I'm not the one in charge, I'm not the one with the language, I am privileged, and I want my people to be able to say that the belovedness of God can be manifested in any guise.

Kyle: That's so helpful about that movement from a singular mountain top experience to the daily integration of the habit and everyday life. Yes, it's helpful.

Bishop Jennifer: Yes, because I think any formation experiences like that. Like you can have the mountain tops, but it's like the waves, the face has to work on your daily. I think it's being disciplined and committed to that way of seeing the world and leading in the world.

Kyle: Yes. Thank you. Well, to wrap things up here, I just wonder if there's any other advice you might have to share with a seminary that is contemplating its future mission and role. What else is on your radar that should be on our radar?

Bishop Jennifer: I would say, one of the great things about seminary time, whether you're doing it part-time or full time or by distance where you only come in during the summer, is just to seek the opportunities to lap up the thing that you don't think you need to do.

It's the opportunity that's a safe place to do the unsafe things, to take some risks, to be challenged by how well the people are bringing God to you and to get really curious about it and to wonder and struggle with it and to, I think, in doing so, be able to be more understanding and empathetic to those who are not people of faith or who struggle with faith or who struggle with being different. Seminary has got so many opportunities for that. I would say anyone who's looking at theological study, lay or ordained, take the risks because it's always formative.

Kyle: Yes. Do I hear right that you're saying that the role of the school is in part to create that safe risk-taking, zone across a bunch of different kinds of experiences? Am I getting that right?

Bishop Jennifer: Yes. I keep thinking about some regrets I had, like I think, "Why didn't I go to Asia or someplace with John Kater? I should've done that." I did other things, so I don't think I wasted a minute of my seminary education. I was taking it all in and I just think there are opportunities like that that are not presented any place else. Seminaries are so important for so many reasons, but I think that's one of the gifts they can offer.

Just rich exploration, and of course, all of that exploring outside is about really enriching what God is doing in the interior and it stays and you can draw from that for a lifetime. I hope people can not play it too safe knowing that the seminary is a place where there is an expectation that you might try some things, learn some things, fail at some things, excel at some things, the way school typically can be.

Kyle: You're giving me all kinds of mushy thoughts about my own experience. It's a good note to end on and Bishop Jennifer, let me just thank you once again for being a part of this little project.

Bishop Jennifer: Oh, it's been a delight, Kyle. Thank 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