



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. I run communications and teach Christian education at Church Divinity School of the Pacific. I'm here with Reverend Shannon Kelly, who is director of the Department of Faith Formation and officer for Young Adult and Campus Ministries for the Episcopal Church. On a personal note in that department, Shannon was my campus minister once upon a time at the University of Wisconsin. Shannon, thank you so much for being with us.

Shannon Kelly: Thanks. It's good to be here

Kyle: Wow. Well, we're going to start the conversation by talking just generally about leadership formation, and in particular, tell us a little bit about how long you've been in your current position or current combination of positions or what have you. We're wondering, how has your thinking about leadership formation maybe changed in that time?

Shannon: Yes. I started working for the Episcopal Church almost six years ago, seven years ago. Always working in the Faith Formation Department. When I was in seminary and before that, in order to do any leadership formation it seemed to be primarily formal education, whether that was an MDiv, or if you were done with that, you went back and got a DMin or whatever it was, but it was formal education or some formal continuing education course.

I would say over the last five or six years, and I think this is partly due to things being more readily available online and people thinking more outside the box that things have shifted to not just being about formal education or getting the formalized certificate or completion, but it's also things that account for your experience. That you can take a single course on Latino ministries, that you can take a single piece of information and delve into that and gather and gain more leadership development.

The other thing I will say is in the position I'm working in now, leadership development is also about mentorship. As I work with youth on the Episcopal youth

event or on design teams, as I work with young adults on various design teams, as I work with chaplains and young adult ministers, so much of formation is also what we've learned when we're doing. Having the mentors, having the adults that will walk alongside you is really key. If, for instance, if we're thinking about liturgy and what that might look like for an upcoming event, I don't just say, "Okay, let's plan evening prayer."

There's always some teaching within that of, what does evening prayer entail? What does that look like? What makes sense for this context? There's always a teaching element that goes into that. I think we need to honor that and really understand that that experience is really valid and a big foundation for discipleship in the church.

Kyle: Let me try this out. It sounds like both of these points you're making, in some ways, point to the kind of notion that so much of the formation that's happening now is like sort of micro-targeted. It's on the job in the course of activity or et cetera, or it's, I chose this thing because I have a particular interest. I have a connection to this piece of material. It seems like one of the real strengths of that as either a supplemental or primary model of formation it's relevance and immediacy. Does that seem right to you?

Shannon: Yes, I would say when I got out of seminary over 20 years ago, we would bemoan, "Oh, if only they had taught us this in seminary, whatever this was." I think now the model has become, "Oh, only if only they had taught us this in seminary. Where can I go learn that?" There's not just a grievance, but it's more of, "Okay, I also have to do continuing education, so where can I find that? Who can I turn to? What can I read?"

Kyle: Yes, and a good reminder that learning is lifelong for leaders in addition to the people that the leaders are leading and teaching, et cetera.

We're curious stories you've heard from maybe from seminarians or from recent graduates or other new or emerging leaders. What kind of hopeful stories are you hearing from people who are just beginning their leadership journeys in the church?

Shannon: As I thought about this, an overarching piece of this is when I left seminary, it was, you go serve in a church. You go do typical congregational ministry, which was fine. That was the trajectory. That was what we all were doing at that point. Now, as I talk to people that are graduating from seminary or that are entering seminary, they have that as a piece of it, but there's also a bigger piece of the story and that is that they don't just see their ministry as wholly a part of the congregation. That it is, they're serving the congregation, but that also means they're serving the community.

When they're serving in the community, that means whatever it means for their context, whether it's an after-school program or a shelter or whatever it is, or if that church has never gone into the community and then in ministry with the community. I feel like that trajectory of people graduating from seminary, fortunately, is much more common than it used to be. It's not just about, how do I do Sunday morning liturgy and how do I do Bible study and how would I run a vestry meeting? It's all of those

things, as well as how are we good community partners? I think that's the hopeful piece of that.

A piece of that, there's a young woman that just graduated from seminary and she's phenomenal. I've known her for years. I remember having a conversation with her at one point. She is bilingual English and Spanish and this was years ago. She and I were talking and she said, "My worry is, if I discern to be an ordained minister that I'm going to have to choose between being an English speaker, Anglo priest, or Spanish speaking," and that those were still two very siloed places. Then they are still in some way, but not as much, but that she would have to choose one of those two silos and whatever she chose first that she would get stuck there.

She has just graduated and is in a place that she's using both her English and Spanish. She's found this great match that just lets her be who she is. That's my hope of where the church is going. That's a little snippet of that is that we don't make leaders fit into the holes that we think that we have but that we invite leaders into ministry, and see where that takes us.

I think if we do it the other way, we're limiting the Holy Spirit's movement among us. In opening up ministry like that, I hope the church is casting a new vision of what it means to be a minister. That it's not just about fulfilling these specific duties, but that it's much, much broader than that. Our experience and our wisdom and our passion comes as a part of our formalized education and that has to be a part of our ministry.

I think if we don't allow leaders to use that, that's where we start seeing people burn out and fade away and be done with ministry because we aren't allowing them to be creative enough. We are allowing the Holy Spirit to break open the radical church that I think especially right now that we're being called to be. That's one of the stories that I have. The other little tiny snippet that I'll share is another young leader who's not on ordination track and who is most definitely a lay professional or on their way to being a lay professional.

The amount of wisdom that that person brings into a room, be it virtual or real, they are always met by clergy saying to them, "When are you going to be ordained? You're such a good preacher. When are you going to take this seriously? When are you going to be ordained?" This person's ability to stand up and say, "I'm not called to that. This is what I'm called to do. Called to be a lay leader and I'm called to live into the ministry exactly as I am right now. Please don't limit me by saying the only way I can truly live into this is through ordination."

His ability to stand up and say that's not what I'm called to be, I think is a phenomenal witness to his faith community that he was brought up in, his parents, everybody else, because so often we as the church, focus so much on ordination when we see gifts from ministry that we don't take seriously even though we say we do, the ministry of all baptized, and what it looks like to be a lay leader in all of the different shapes that that takes.

That's helpful for me as well, is that we aren't just pigeon-holing every single leader, hopefully, into ordained ministry, and that we're really lifting up people that are doing amazing ministry, whether they're lay or ordained. Those are some glimmers of

hope. I think, in both of those stories, that also gives us a picture of the future of the Church. Of a church that's much more broad and thinks differently than we have in the past. At least, that's my hope.

Kyle: As you're saying that, I was struck by I think in both cases of a sense of, as you said, being spirit lead rather than institution or job description lead, and potentially also having the ability for there to be this nimbleness responsiveness because you have a whole person encountering a context, from their whole personhood rather than saying, "Well, this is not strictly speaking what I was hired to do here." You need those boundaries too in some cases, but I think there's something exciting about the possibility of a community of leaders that is always open to more fully following an opportunity when it matches who they are as a leader, I think.

Kyle: For this next question, I want to invite you to think big, and sky's really the limit. If you were going to commission or maybe team teach, I don't know, maybe you just want to invite someone, maybe you want to teach with them. Some course taught by any instructor in the world from history if you want even but who's someone you'd want teaching today seminarians and what course would you want them to teach?

Shannon: I don't know who the person would be. Maybe this is because as I think about what I would hope would be taught is there's so much of it that comes from a place of being a minority. I would love to see classes that don't focus on-- I'm sorry, but mostly the dead white guys. I would love to see classes that really embrace feminism and multiculturalism and race and just all of that. I would love for there to be courses and not just one course that takes all of the minorities and puts them together because I had that in seminary, but courses that would really value all of the voices at the table. Maybe those courses already exist.

I wonder if it's a multi teacher approach because it can't just be one voice either. The way that each person views the world is not going to be the same as another. What are some of the wisest voices? What are some of the most passionate voices? What are some of the voices that are really quiet, but that just say these deeply profound things? Those are the voices that we need to hear from and that I think our future leaders could really grow from.

Yes, it's important to read some of the historical figures, but I am not sure we need to keep reading all of them at the disservice of not reading others. I think there's a call for that. I think, and again, this is hearkening back to when I was in seminary, one of the things that jumped out at me, and it was two sentences in a liturgic's class, but that I've held on to and that have served me well and that are radical for a lot of priests. That is the practicalness of liturgy. When Louis Weil was teaching us and I asked a question about, what would this kind of liturgy look like if we were at camp or doing a youth retreat?

He had never thought of it that way and said, "Well, I don't know, why don't you tell me, what would this look like?" We had a great conversation about that. He then paused and said to the whole class, "Whenever you're doing liturgy, make sure that it

doesn't serve you as the priest but that it serves your context and your people." That is the thing that-- There's some of that that's missing.

How do we really lift up classes where we can embrace the practicalness of the very mystical and amazing things that we do as leaders, but that we don't trip over ourselves? That's my hope, is that that we're really training leaders, whether they're lay or ordained, to think practically, about what they're doing and to allow them to experience and experiment in ways that can invite the Holy into a place, in a way that we may not otherwise get to witness.

I think in order for us to live through the moment that we're living through and come out a different church, which I think we're being called to do, that's where we have to go. That's going to be painful for some people, I get that, but I also think that's a necessity.

Kyle: Question now, we didn't want to lead with this question, but we do want to get eventually to this question of, what's one change you think we could make? We being CDSP or we being theological education or the church as a whole, however you want to tackle it, but what's a change we could make to how we're training leaders today that could make a positive difference for the church?

Shannon: This is an easy one for me because I've been thinking about this for like 30 years. It is taking discipleship of people seriously, for all ages. I say that because when we go to a church, it is very rare for a Rector, an assistant Rector, to be teaching Sunday school for small children. It is very rare for them to be doing youth group. It is very rare for them to be focused on young adult formation. If we are about growing disciples, which I think we are as a church, that's one of the things that we're about, we have to take seriously formation for all ages.

There are so many different stages in life and I feel like we focus our teaching and discipleship on a select few. It depends on where you are as to what that select few is, it could be children and youth or it could be older, but my hope would be that leaders in the church would understand, not just the importance of having a children's minister, but that would be willing to serve in that position themselves. That would be willing to be the youth minister themselves. I know that being a Rector or serving in a church or at a diocese is a big job, but if we're not regularly interacting with different age groups, we're missing. We're missing a big part of discipleship.

I remember taking a class in seminary that was faith formation for the congregation, was the title. I assumed that meant congregations go from zero to whatever, and so it would be a touchstone of all of those things. All of the class was about adult formation, and really adult formation that was geared toward starting with parents and then working adults. You leave off two big ends of the spectrum of what faith formation is. I think we tend to do that.

We tend to leave children's ministry and youth ministry, especially to those other people that we hire to do it, or our volunteers or our parents that are already super tired, but want to make sure that their children have faith formation. All of that is a part of our job of creating disciples. How do we do that? How do we help? I'm not saying all leaders need to magically know how to do this, but how do we help train

them to know how to do this or even where to look for resources or where to ask questions?

I don't think it's a willful negligence. I just think it's something that we forget or we assume that other people are doing that because it's easier to think, well everyone still has a Sunday school leader, which they don't, and everyone just hires a youth minister, which they don't. We have to get back to thinking about intergenerational things and about how do we train our leaders to at least understand how to communicate God's love, the wisdom, the love? How do we communicate that to all of the different age groups and be fully present with them?

Kyle: Yes. That's helpful what you just said. I've been planning the syllabus for the faith formation class this fall and one of my beliefs is that learning is more similar across age groups than we think it is. Everybody wants to talk about what's the right way to teach kids? What's the right way? Actually, communication seems to me to be the much bigger piece of that, that we actually have our heads around pretty well like how people learn, and it's the, how do we communicate across generation, across age, across developmental stages and places in life, where we often get tripped up?

Shannon: Yes. I would agree with that. I've seen people get tripped up thinking that they have to talk down to people, whoever that is, to younger people. When in fact, you don't. I mean you may have to change some of the big words that are found in the Bible to phrases that are more descriptive for the younger kids, but those kids get it. I mean, they get it in such an amazing way.

I remember doing a children's chapel and there were about 30 kids there. It was during the Christmas season. We're telling the story of Jesus' birth and Joseph, and I asked the question, well, what do you think it was like to be Mary? Some of the kids answered that question. Then I asked the question, what did you think it was like to be Joseph? One of the little boys just popped up and said, "Well, I think it would have been cool because like Jesus had two dads. Joseph was just bonus."

He like summed up the story, but then another kid said, "I think God was trying to say that Jesus needed all the love he could get." It's like, yes, of course. It's not talking down to them, it's telling them the story, sharing the Bible's wisdom with them and then allowing them to respond. That's true for every single age group. I don't think we give adults enough time to really listen to Bible stories and just have that gut response to it. It's always the head response. What is our gut response? What's the first thing you think of? How do we really invite people into that is my question.

Kyle: Yes. That's a good one. Well, to wrap up, we have one final question and that's just, what advice would you share with a seminary that's contemplating its future mission and role? What would you want us or any seminary to be thinking about these days?

Shannon: Yes, I think I've said a lot of it. There's a couple of things that I will touch on, which I think you guys are doing some of this already, is the need for asset-based community development approach to ministry that we're really inviting people into. Like I said before, not just ministering inside of a building, but to the

community that surrounds it. What does that look like? I know CDSP is doing some of that already and that's phenomenal.

The other two things that I would invite seminaries to think about is, again, when I was in seminary and Louis Weil kept saying to us, "praying, shapes, believing. Praying, shapes, believing." I come back to liturgy not because I'm a super liturgist or anything, but because I think it helps us develop into who we are and who we can become. The last two things that I want to offer is that we, and I'm not saying don't pay attention to the rubrics. I'm not saying throw the BCP out the window.

What I'm saying is, when we adhere so strongly to a strict liturgical way of doing anything, we are falling into white supremacy because it is the white church that has dictated for hundreds of years, thousands of years, what meaningful worship looks like. If we aren't allowing a bigger and a wider breadth of what liturgy looks like, what it feels like, what it smells like, then we're missing out. A part of that is that seminaries fully embrace as much as they can multi-lingual worship. Not just as the one soft Spanish service, or you know what I'm saying.

It's the multi-language, I'm talking about some of the native American languages, Spanish, Haitian, any of those, sign language, to make it as much a part of worship as you can, and that it's just normal. When we normalize some of these things that we see as other, or that we see as special, when we normalize them, then it just becomes a part of who we are.

Obviously, all of that has to be done without appropriation, with some real education and intentionality about how we're inviting multilingual multicultural worship, but that work can be done. I think we have to do that work with our leaders now because we need that right now actually. We need that kind of multilayered worship, where it's not a special thing, but it simply is who we are. Using seminary as a way to introduce that to people and allow them to experience it, ask questions, in all of the things that you may not want to do normally, but you're in a learning environment.

Kyle: Beautiful. Thank you.

Shannon: Thanks.

Kyle: Shannon, really appreciate your willingness to talk with us for this series. It's good to see your face and hear a voice and really looking forward to our listeners and readers, getting to take some of these insights into their own practice.

Shannon: Thanks. It's been so good to be with you, and I hope at some point, to come out to see the CDSP and visit you guys.

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