



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 at Church Divinity School of the Pacific. I'm here with Reverend David Beckmann, who was with us at CDSP last spring as a visiting fellow. Reverend Beckmann, welcome.

David Beckmann: Thanks for doing this.

Kyle: Thanks for being with us.

Beckmann: It was great to be with CDSP. It's a really fine place. The whole Graduate Theological Union is impressive, and its location right next to the university is a huge advantage.

Kyle: It's a really exciting place to do ministry and to learn. I'm excited to talk with you more today about how you joined with us in that ministry. Before we start with that, I'm wondering if you can introduce yourself to our listeners and tell us a little bit about your own vocation in minister, in the church and especially in the nonprofit world.

Beckmann: I served for several decades as president of Bread for the World, which is I think the largest faith-based advocacy movement in the country, certainly on poverty and hunger issues. When I was ordained as a Lutheran pastor, my call was to connect Christian faith and moral teaching, to be a missionary economist, to connect Christian faith and moral teaching to economics, especially poverty issues. I spent quite a while as an economist at the World Bank, I was sort of a gadfly at the World Bank, pushing to make the bank more effective for poor people.

I was also doing religious ministry within the World Bank. At Bread for the World, I led large-scale campaigns, and effective campaigns, to get the US Government to do big things for people in poverty in our country and around the world. I've been retired from

that job for a year. I think it's just a great opportunity for me to continue to provide some leadership in congressional advocacy, but also to learn and teach about how over time, or actually how right now we can be more effective in translating the gospel of God's love for the world into political changes that would be good for people in need.

Kyle: Can you help us make our thinking about this ministry a bit more concrete and tell us about one of the campaigns that Bread for the World engaged in that helped to improve living conditions for people in need?

Beckmann: I think the most dramatic example is on global poverty and hunger. Bread for the World and much of the rest of the church community in this country, really starting in around the year 2000, we were able to play a major role in quadrupling US foreign assistance that's focused on reducing poverty around the world and also improving the quality of US assistance. During this period up until COVID, there was just dramatic progress against hunger, poverty, and disease. Even now, the setback because of COVID is huge, but nothing like a reversal of all the progress that's been made since the year 2000, not even close.

That's an example where just a lot of Christian people, Christian leaders over a period of decades kept pushing on different aspects of getting the US government to do its part, and we were successful and there's no question that it helped to reduce poverty in the world. When I started working at Bread for the World, I assumed that it was just a matter of marginal changes for the better at best, but then we started seeing dramatic reductions in hunger, poverty, and disease in places like Ethiopia and Bangladesh. That's just really changed my perception.

It just made it clear that we can virtually end hunger, poverty, and avoidable disease within a couple of decades, if we can organize the necessary political give a damn.

Kyle: Well, maybe that's a good segue to a question about the faith angle on this work. I'm curious to hear a bit more about what it meant for you to be leading Bread for the World, and what it means for you today to continue to be involved in this advocacy world as a person who's also an ordained Lutheran pastor. How do you think about those dual roles and their relationship?

Beckmann: Well, I think the fact that it is in our generation, and that we've made progress against poverty, that we can make progress against poverty, hunger, and disease, I see this as Almighty God moving in our own time. It's like a great exodus underway. Do we think God's not part of this? You can't worship the God of love that we know in Jesus Christ and not realize that this is something God is doing in our time, wanting us to be part of it in our time. The Gospel of God's love for the world in Jesus, very much motivates me and lots of other people to keep pushing and to get the whole church involved.

In fact, lots of people, other people of faith and goodwill to deliver on the opportunities that God has made possible for us, just seems to me to be really important to the integrity of the Christianity in the United States. For me there's just a deep link between

getting our government to do its part. You can't get to the end of hunger if the US government is AWOL, and they often are. We know from experience that we can change that. We can make a difference, and it's just a matter of getting ourselves organized in effective ways.

I think also, preaching the gospel in a way that moves us all to see that our civic life, our life as citizens, is part of what we have to offer to God. One thing that God wants us to behave as individuals, but God also wants justice in the land and justice in the world. It's also a matter of helping to shape the churches and other faith communities in ways that really do praise God. It's not like this is some add-on. We know from the Hebrew scriptures, from the Christian scriptures, that God has come into the world. God comes down. God doesn't take us up into heaven.

God comes down into our world. So to live the gospel, to enjoy the gospel fully, is also I think to work for social justice in various ways, and that includes work to-- Our politics right now are very screwed up. What's with this that a quarter of the people in the country are in religious services every week, but just an awful lot of those folks think that food stamps and foreign aid are somehow a bad thing or not very important? I think there's something wrong with the churches, and part of what people in seminaries ought to be doing is trying to figure out how are we going to change that.

In fact, all people lay and clergy alike, we're all called to figure out how to pray for our country, work for our country, to make our country better aligned with what God's trying to do in the world.

Kyle: Thank you for that. I'm wondering if you can give us the 30,000-foot view of the recent course that you taught with us and with the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley. Give us a sense for the broad approach of your course.

Beckmann: Well, it was based on this awareness that we might be able to virtually end hunger and poverty in our time, that faith communities can make a difference. We have made a difference, but we could do a lot more. Half the students were Graduate Theological students, half the students were from the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of Berkeley, the University of California at Berkeley. What we did is explored the how, basically strategies. What are strategies that people are following now, that would be faith-based organizing and communities, legislative advocacy?

I think one strategy that we saw is really important now is partisan politics, so we heard from Josh Dixon. One of the guest speakers was Josh Dixon, who was a national faith engagement director for the Biden-Harris campaign. I learned a lot about-- I think he's a model, in fact, of effective involvement in partisan politics. I worked in a bipartisan way all my life, but I'm really disappointed with the Republicans in Congress this year. Not with all Republicans, but I think the congressional leadership has been really off-the-tracks.

It's just really clear, to me, the kind of work that Josh does to get good candidates elected, candidates who care about justice for the poor elected, especially, in '22, is

going to be a big deal. One thing I learned from his presentation is that the Biden campaign did a better job than, say, the Clinton campaign, four years before, in reaching out to faith communities. The number of conservative evangelicals, white evangelicals who switched from Trump in 2016 to Biden in 2020, was enough to make the difference in three swing states.

Those white evangelicals who heard Biden's pitch that racial and economic justice is a faith issue and voted for Biden, that switch, if it hadn't happened, Biden wouldn't be in the White House. The work of people who get involved in campaigns, who support parties, that's not somehow outside the field of Christian discipleship, I think it's part of it.

Kyle: As you reflect on how you've worked throughout your career and your ministry, and how you're thinking about this today, I think I hear you saying that it may be that those of us who care about the kinds of issues that Bread for the World cares about, these collective social-justice issues related to people's material needs, that there seems to be, at this moment, less possibility for that work to happen in a bipartisan way, and that we might need to be more comfortable working in partisan ways.

If I'm hearing you right on that, what advice do you have for churches who might be fearful of that kind of framing for their engagement?

Beckmann: What does that mean for church people? It means that, in addition to our deductible contributions to churches and charities, we need to give non-deductible contributions to candidates and parties. That should be part of our charitable budget, and then also our time. We should work at the local food bank at the local food pantry but we need to give time to voter registration, voter mobilization, advocacy on voting issues at the state level, and then also the political campaigns. Then I think, also there need to be faith structures.

Kyle: That's really helpful. You gave us an introduction to the setting of your course and to how you went about it and some of the folks that-- at least one of the people that you talk to in the course of the class. I'm curious if you can say a bit from your perspective about how the partnership aspect of this course worked. I think it was really quite inspiring that we were able as a seminary, through your leadership, to offer a class in collaboration with a public policy school. I'm curious, how do you think that went and what was it like to have seminarians and these graduate public policy students together in the same Zoom, in this case, classroom?

Beckmann: Well, Mark Richardson played a key role in making this happen and I really appreciate that. The class was good. It really was good that people from the CDSP and the other GTU schools were together with students of policy and political science from the Goldman School of Public Policy. By one ranking, it's the best school of public policy in the country, and it's on Holy Hill. It's right next door to CDSP. The Dean of the Goldman School, longtime Dean, Henry Brady, when I first started talking to him, he said— he attended Union Theological Seminary before he started studying political science.

He said, "I've been trying for years to convince people here at Goldman, that the churches are important to politics." He was open to doing something and then Mark Richardson really helped to make it happen. I think the course itself was really interesting and also maybe it was a breakthrough in the relationship or opened up possibilities for deeper, closer relationship between, specifically, Berkeley Public Policy and Graduate Theological Union. I think CDSP is in a leadership role there. It's right next door to Goldman, it's had this experience with Goldman.

There's also representative Barbara Lee, who represents Berkeley in Congress is one of the most powerful Democrats, she now leads the Foreign Aid Funding Committee. She's really important on the global poverty issues, and Goldman and the Graduate Theological Union are making plans to invite Barbara Lee this fall to come and speak to people from both those communities, and also from the Berkeley community generally, and to speak about food justice issues around the world, maybe.

We'll see how that all works out, but it would allow the chairman of the Foreign Aid Appropriations Committee to talk to her constituents about global poverty issues. Even in Berkeley, it's not clear to the member of Congress that there are a whole lot of people in our district who are as concerned about global poverty as they are about a lot of things here at home.

I'm excited about that, and excited that that event would be a partnership of the Graduate Theological Union and Goldman, and with CDSP as an instrumental mediator.

They have a lot to teach each other. CDSP is very much focused on not only pastoring the people in the church, but helping the people in the church to be in mission to the world. They've got a lot to teach and teach to the public policy folks at Goldman, and also, Goldman knows a lot about the public policies that would actually help us get to a world that better reflects what God wants.

Kyle: I'm curious if there's a particular moment or insight, or particular story from your experience in the class that has stuck with you.

Beckmann: I think the highlight of the whole thing was when you attended the session with Barbara Lee. She was invited by Dr. Barbara William Skinner, who's the coordinator of the National African American Clergy Network, and together they were talking about the role of the black church, over decades, in gradually building the electoral power of the African American community. What we see now, the African American communities, especially women, got Biden elected for sure. He would not be there for sure if they hadn't been as supportive as they were.

It's taken decades to break down the barriers to voting. They're fighting now to keep new barriers from coming up, and then also to get people to vote. Lots of times, people who are really stressed out with problems in their own lives, and then if people are in poverty, getting them to the polls is no small matter. That was the topic. What I liked best was the way that the two women both-- they left our Zoom call at slightly different

times, and both on their way out, they did these rapid-fire recitations of hymns and Bible verses.

It was just clear that both women, on the way out, and saying goodbye, were quoting what they've learned in church over many years.

Kyle: I'm curious, this is maybe a little inside baseball, but the actual convening of that conversation on that day ended up being a little bit of a moving target as a nonpolitical person, I found myself feeling like I was on an episode of *The West Wing* or something. We were getting this running commentary from Congresswoman Lee's various associates who were trying to help us make this happen, and from Dr. William-Skinner. I believe she spoke to us from the car on the way to a vote. Is that how business gets conducted in this world, or is that just something we see on TV?

Beckmann: Barbara Lee was on her way-- she was planning to be part of the Zoom call in front of the screen, and she couldn't do that because she had to get to this-- they called a vote, and so she had to get over to the floor to vote. It was pretty exciting. I think what you say is true that in general, a lot of the advocacy work is a little bit on the run. You're always adapting to what's happening in Congress now, and the members of Congress are always adapting to what's happening now. It's not easy to govern a country of 350 million diverse people, especially nowadays.

These people are Republicans and Democrats alike, and I just think they tend to be pretty dedicated people and hardworking people. If you're trying to get to them, you need to be smart and walk with them.

Kyle: I think it's a relevant point for leaders of faith communities, including our students and faculty and staff, that as constituents of our political leaders, that we have perhaps more power than we think, especially when we stand at the nexus of communities and movements of people, and aren't just-- it's important to call our senators, as you said, but also to let our senators know that we are a part of much larger communities of voters and advocates who care about these issues.

Beckmann: Exactly. I live in Alexandria, Virginia normally. There are several churches here who've been active in Bread for the World over the years, more than several. For our members of Congress, they know Christ Church, and Westminster Presbyterian, and Blessed Sacrament, they know that those communities, those churches, are hearing about what they're doing on poverty-related issues.

For example, funding for WIC, the child nutrition program in this country, or Bread for the World this year is running a big campaign to further expand what the US is doing to reduce child malnutrition around the world. We know a lot about that, we suffered a lot of reversal of progress during COVID. Those kinds of issues, you can raise in almost any congregation and ask people to use their voice to write, call as a congregation. Not that everybody in the congregation needs to write, but that the congregation is inviting their members to write on an issue like that, and that's very powerful.

I want both parties to be active in pushing for things that are good on racial and economic justice issues. The way to have that happen is exactly that it's changed in our spiritual lives that then eventually gets reflected in our political priorities.

Kyle: Both for members of congregations and for leaders of congregations, like the folks who are in your class, the CDSP and GTU students who are in your class. I think I hear you saying that part of what can make a difference is the practical experiences of advocacy and involvement. At least for the students in your class, did you get a sense that your students came out better prepared to be faith leaders who are engaged in those kinds of conversations?

Beckmann: Yes. Actually, I'm really excited. The most exciting parts of the class have been after the class was over, and I heard from students. One CDSP student is also working in Sonoma County Government. She's part of a unit of the government that's focused on poverty reduction in Sonoma County, but they've never really had much connection between the county government and faith communities in Sonoma County.

As I recall, she grew up in a religiously conservative home and was kind of turned off in the end, and just assumed, "Well, the churches aren't doing anything anyway," but I think the course led her to reach out to the faith community in that county. Last I heard she's working with a couple of members of the Governing Board of the Sonoma County government to maybe set up a faith liaison position for the county, or even a faith unit. A faith liaison unit. A faith and neighborhood partnership unit for the county. That was exciting.

Kyle: Wow.

Beckmann: One young woman connected to the course twice a week, and she's connected from Nanjing, China. She's hoping to study at a school of public policy in the United States next year. I asked people at the beginning of the class to talk about their own experience of faith in their communities of faith and their own experiences with poverty.

She was following these discussions sort of what Episcopalians are thinking, what are Lutherans thinking, what are evangelical Latinos thinking, what's the Black church thinking? That's pretty complicated, sort of inside baseball, to follow from Nanjing, China, but then when it came her turn to talk about herself, she said, "The only Chinese person that I've ever met who was religious was my grandmother." I asked her at one point about NGOs, she said, "No. We don't have those here," non-governmental organizations. She did an action project as part of the course. She got together a group of people, other students, and they did surveys in their area on food security issues.

In the pandemic, there were real problems of food security, especially getting fruits and vegetables, good quality nutrition. This groups of students in Nanjing was serving in their own situation, and I think they're planning to submit that to The United Nations. The UN is convening a global food systems summit in September when Biden speaks at the general assembly.

I think that student is going to be sending in a submission from these students in Nanjing because the UN is inviting people all over the world to think about food justice issues.

The third example is a student who-- I'd ask each student to give 20 hours to an activist project, and one of our speakers is a leader in thinking about digital communication for good, using artificial intelligence to listen to people who don't get listened to, and also to engage people of faith in progressive issues. His name's Eric Sapp. One of the students contacted Eric and asked if he could be an intern in that company for these 20 hours. He ended up working 200 hours and getting a paid fellowship to continue working for Eric Sapp.

Kyle: Wow.

Beckmann: I think this could be a turning point in his career and in his life. I do want to say that I don't think poverty is just another issue. You can come at these various ways, human rights, the environment. The widow, the orphan, the immigrant, these people are really close to the heart of God.

Then I think the fact that the world is making-- If you take a longer-term, we have made dramatic progress against poverty in my lifetime and that much more progress is clearly possible. That also makes it somewhat exceptional because once you understand that we don't have to put up with hungry kids in America. We don't have to have millions of hungry kids in America.

Once you get that, and to make that happen, you can't food bank your way to the end of hunger. You got a food bank, but you've also got to get the US government to provide leadership, and we can do that. I just think the feasibility of progress makes the politics of poverty especially urgent, and gospel urgent. Christian. Important to God, urgent.

Kyle: Well, thank you for that really apt summary of this work and this course. I just want to shout out that the resources that you mentioned are available in the show notes for this episode. You can find Reverend Beckmann's blog posts at DavidBeckmann.net/blog. You can find the landing page for those episodes on the CDSP website at CDSP.edu/poverty-god-politics. And they're also available on the public policy channel of the University of California's television presence on YouTube, and so a remarkably large and growing audience engaging with the materials from this course.

So on behalf of CDSP, I just want to say a big thank you, once again, Reverend Beckmann for your work. I want to encourage everyone listening to get involved in checking out the resources that you've mentioned and taking the kinds of action that you've mentioned today. And I want to thank you very much for your time and being with us.

Beckmann: Let me add my thanks to the people who have listened to this. I think people who listen to something like this, they are change agents. They are leaders of the church, leaders in the world, and strategists. I think, especially for people who are

trying to figure out how to be more effective than they already are in moving the world toward what God hopes for. It's people like the people who have listened to this who may actually dig in and find the other materials related to the course really useful in their own ministries, so thanks to them and thanks especially to you, Kyle.

Kyle: You're very welcome, and blessings on your continuing teaching, and advocacy, and other ministry.

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