



**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'm here with the Right Reverend Susan Brown Snook, Bishop of the Diocese of San Diego. Bishop Susan, thanks so much for being with us.

**Bishop Susan Brown Snook:** Glad to be with you. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

**Kyle:** Thank you, me too. We're going to be talking today about leadership formation and thoughts on the future of leadership formation in the Episcopal Church. You have been serving now for still a relatively short time in the Diocese of San Diego, but we wanted to start by getting your perspective on, in that relatively new role, how has your thinking about leadership formation changed?

**Bishop Susan:** I didn't have a whole lot of experience before I came into this role with the Commission on Ministry or formation of candidates for ordination. It's been a real learning experience for me. The first thing I would have to say is the leadership is obviously absolutely essential for implementing the vision of the diocese, and ordained leadership in particular because we equip our ordained leaders to lead communities and to implement our vision. Here in San Diego, our vision is all about mission evangelism and sharing the good news of Christ in the different ways that that manifests. The good news of Christ manifests in true evangelism. It manifests in speaking to the social issues that are confronting us at this time. It manifests in the way that we worship and the way that we protect our communities in a public health crisis and so forth.

What I have learned is that having our vision for the diocese is absolutely essential to know what kind of leaders we want to train and ordain, and that includes lay leaders as well. We have been thinking a lot about the kind of people we want to discern ordained

callings with and about how to form them for ministry. I believe that despite all the mess that's going on all around us everywhere, we need to change our focus in the church from focusing on a narrative of decline, which has been the overriding story in the Episcopal Church for at least a decade now, to a narrative of mission.

We have really good news to share. We have a really important mission to accomplish. I think that to accomplish that mission, we need to have leaders who are trained to be innovators, entrepreneurial leaders, community organizers, people who can connect with the communities around them, people who have a really a good handle on what is the good news for the community, for whatever community you're ministering to. What is the good news of Christ that we have to proclaim? They need to have a willingness to go out and proclaim it.

There is one eternal truth. There is eternal truth that is applicable everywhere, but the good news has different focus or different concentration in different communities. People need to understand what that good news is for them and for their neighborhoods. And they need to learn how to proclaim it. Not all of us are gifted one-on-one evangelists, but all of us should be able to lead a community that proclaims the good news, that gets out into the neighborhood, that responds to the needs that we see there. That's important.

I believe it's more important than ever now to have multicultural understanding and training. In our context, Spanish is very important, but it's more than that. We need to understand the experience of racial and ethnic groups other than the dominant group in our society and the dominant group in our church. I think that multicultural training needs to go further than, say, anti-racism training, and to help people get some basic understanding of the history and viewpoints and so forth of the ethnic groups that are in our communities.

**Kyle:** I wonder, you talk about understanding how the good news might resonate differently or take root differently in different communities. How does one come to get retrained to hear that good news in different ways in different places? In a concrete way, what does that look like?

**Bishop Susan:** Well, the easiest way to understand the good news for the people in your context is to be similar to those people, to have basic affinity for those people. I came to adult Christian faith as a young upwardly mobile professional, who discovered that life was completely empty if all I was concentrating on was success and making money and so forth. In my ministry as a parish priest, that was the community that I resonated with deeply. The good news for them would be that life is not about these things that ultimately lead to emptiness. There is a deeper meaning and purpose to life and you have something unique to offer the world that God wants to empower you to offer.

The good news might look very different in a poverty-stricken community, or a community of homeless people, or a community of immigrants or-- Every context is

different and every one of those communities needs to hear the good news that is relevant to them. What I had to offer about life not being empty is true everywhere but other people need to hear other aspects of the true good news that we have to proclaim.

**Kyle:** That's helpful. Thank you. I'm wondering if you've heard some stories from I would say from seminarians from recent graduates from other new leaders in your context in the Diocese of San Diego. What are some stories of new leadership that you're hearing that make you hopeful for the future of the church?

**Bishop Susan:** What I'm really hopeful about is the way that younger, newer ordained and lay leaders are talking differently about mission than they were back in 2003 when I graduated from CDSP. I think that the younger generation of new leaders, rising leaders in our church, are really passionate and focused on proclaiming the good news in new ways. I think that they are not so focused on getting a job as an associate and then as a vicar and then as a rector and then as a cardinal rector and then a dean and whatever. They're not so focused on the career track. Actually what they realize is that that career track, a lot of places it doesn't exist anymore.

They are in ministry as an adventure, and they realize that they will be proclaiming the good news of Christ to a wider society that has decided that that is irrelevant to them, a lot of them have, or have a very negative view of what that is based on the behavior of some prominent Christians. They are starting from a new place. They're starting from a place where they realize that ministry is going to be an adventure, that they're probably going to have to be a part of completely reinventing the church over the course of their ministry. Over the next 20 or 30 years, we're going to find a lot of things are different.

Because they don't have so much security to look forward to, they realize that we are on a mission of discipleship and that's what they want to accomplish, helping people hear the good news of Christ and also learn to follow Him and to implement His mission in the world which means working toward social and racial justice and working to make tangible changes in the well-being of people and not simply providing the very highest quality worship service, which is important—we should do that—but a worship service that's very high quality could happen in a park. It could happen in a traditional sanctuary with incense. It needs to be what is right for the worshiping community.

**Kyle:** Great, thank you. I want to invite you for this next question to really think big, let your imagination go wild. We are inviting participants here to imagine that they had the chance to commission or team-teach or however you want to think of it a course for today's seminarians taught by any instructor, anyone you could think of. With those parameters, I'm curious, who would you invite to teach and what would you call the course?

**Bishop Susan:** Well, it so happens that I was working just this morning on figuring out what a course like that might look like. Totally unrelated to this interview I promise. [chuckles]

**Kyle:** [chuckles]

**Bishop Susan:** I mentioned that our local school for ministry for local formation, mostly for deacons, but a few priests, is currently going through a visioning process to figure out really what kind of leaders we want to train and ordain and how to prepare them for ministry.

The course that we're designing will be something like church mission, but that's a really basic dumb name. We haven't gotten to the name yet. I think that it needs to include elements of everything we've talked about. It needs to include, what is the good news of Christ? Let's start at the beginning because most Episcopalians actually don't have a very good handle on it. Like what is the good news of Christ? If we say it's about more than just going to heaven when you die, which we do, then what is it?

We all need to have a handle on that and we need to learn and practice how to share it. It will include leadership training, like missional leadership training. Like how do you lead your congregation out into the community in a community organizing fact-finding kind of way to connect with people and learn what the needs are both spiritual and physical of the people in your community, and bring that back and start working on what is God's vision for your congregation?

So it's some community organizing kind of training. It will include a multicultural component. That'll be a big part of our training anyway, but we want people to go and experience different kinds of multicultural ministry contexts, and reflect on them, and reflect on what that says about what they've always assumed the church will be. I would say, learning about evangelism, learning about community organizing, and learning about multicultural ministries, those are the things that I think that ordained leaders will need to be able to do to change the narrative in the church from a narrative of decline to a narrative of mission and start leading the church in that direction.

**Kyle:** Well, that's a good segue, I think, grounded in the context of a course for your context. I'm curious, from your perspective, we decided we didn't want to lead with this question about like, "What should we do differently?" We do think it's a really important question. Is there a change that you would want to make to how leaders are trained in the Episcopal Church that you think could make a really positive difference? Or if you think it's something you've said already, could you elaborate on that?

**Bishop Susan:** Well, I greatly appreciate what CDSP is doing in its pioneering approach to distance learning. Your low residency MDiv and Anglican studies programs are really important because I think fewer and fewer people can go away for residential seminary. Related to that, I would say, I would love to see ways to train ordained

leaders, with great academic rigor and everything else, for whom English is not their first language and it's very difficult for them to do academic work in English.

If there is a way to provide appropriate seminary training for people coming through not the usual Episcopal circles and who are called to leadership in not the majority context, but in other ethnic context, especially Spanish, that would be really helpful to me. Now, I'm pausing because I'm trying to remember your exact question.

**Kyle:** Forgive me for not having this at the tip of my tongue and having done better research, but my memory is that you served in that capacity for some time in a non-traditional setting. Is there anything you'd want to say about what you learned on the job and in a setting like that, that has opened up these questions for you? Does that make sense?

**Bishop Susan:** Yes. I was a church planter, and the majority of my priestly career was spent in the church that I planted, which is Church of the Nativity in Scottsdale, Arizona.

It was a wonderful adventure. I learned that ministry needs to be an adventure, that people who believe that they are joining Jesus in a mission to do something new and tremendous are really motivated to do remarkable things and that it was a miracle really when I was on that adventure. I started with 10 people in a living room, and it grew into a school cafeteria and then into an office building, and then we built a building.

The remarkable thing was you start with nothing, and then you watch a thing come into being, so that in itself is incredibly rewarding and exciting. The great thing was that any time we had a need and did not know where it was coming from, God provided something. When we were with those 10 people, it turned out that the 11th person that joined us was an amazing bookkeeper and experienced church accountant, right?

**Kyle:** Wow.

**Bishop Susan:** You need to be able to count the money. The 12th person that joined us was an experienced godly play teacher. All of a sudden, we had a children's minister, and then number 13 and 14 were a married couple who wanted to do youth work. It was like every time we needed something, even when we were in despair, like our school where we were meeting decided they didn't want a church meeting there anymore and there was no way we could build a building. A member stepped forward and said, "Hey, I've got this suite in an office building. I'll let you use it rent-free for five years." It was like-

**Kyle:** Wow.

**Bishop Susan:** -every time we needed something, God provided it. What I have to say is, do not despair of things that look impossible because, I think I've read this somewhere, nothing will be impossible with God.

**Kyle:** Yes, that sounds familiar.

**Bishop Susan:** [chuckles]

**Kyle:** Well, and that's something we see too. I never thought about it this way, but you talked about the context of watching something new come into being, and maybe one of the gifts of these new entrepreneurial kinds of ministries and finding our way into this new reality for the church, whatever it's going to look like, maybe that puts us in a place once again to be able to have that experience of unexpected provision. [chuckles]

**Bishop Susan:** Right, yes. You showed up with a couple of loaves and some fish and all of a sudden you're feeding 5,000 people. This is the Christian journey. This is the Christian adventure, and God does provide.

**Kyle:** Yes, and it may stand in some distinction to the experience that has been normative for so long, of like, "Well, we've already got everything."

**Bishop Susan:** [chuckles]

**Kyle:** In some ways, the only thing we can experience is loss, if we've been in this position of-- Even if we know that the so-called good old days weren't actually what we remember that as, it seems like-- I don't know, I just wonder if this, the sort of spirit of new creation that, as you said, is sort of taking hold in a new way in a new generation of leaders might help us all reengage with that sense that God provides.

**Bishop Susan:** Yes. There's a very real sense in which the current time feels apocalyptic. It feels like everything is falling apart and every possible thing that could possibly go wrong is going wrong right now in ways that we never imagined could happen. There are times when we are tempted to lose hope, like all these people that are sitting on the couch watching church online, or not, are they ever going to come back to church? Those are very real concerns.

The fact is that times when people are losing hope and feeling like the world does not have a lot to offer them, those are the times when the church has thrived in the past and the times when the church has hoped to preach because the life and ministry of Jesus Christ tells us that there is always hope, that God provides us hope, and that God is always working. The coming of the Holy Spirit tells us that in a world where we're not sure we speak the language anymore, the Holy Spirit gives us new words to speak. We always have good news to proclaim.

**Kyle:** Yes. Well, this has been so rich and as we start to wrap up, is there any other advice that you would want to share with a seminary that is contemplating its mission and its role in the decades ahead or the years ahead, the months ahead? [chuckles]

**Bishop Susan:** I'm more convinced than ever that good basic training in Bible and theology is absolutely essential, but what I would love to see seminaries do is figure out how to jump on board with the kind of new mission orientation that I think the whole

church will need to adopt. I'm repeating myself, but you know. [chuckles] Except for the part about Bible and theology, I don't want to undercut that part.

**Kyle:** Yes. Well, and finding the ways that, it's not as if— I think this is exactly what I hear you saying. It's not like those things are antithetical. It's how do you teach Bible and theology in that context and let them speak to this new movement.

**Bishop Susan:** Yes, definitely.

**Kyle:** Cool. Well, Bishop Susan, we really appreciate your time and your insight and we're looking forward to hearing your voice alongside many others in this piece.

**Bishop Susan:** Thank you. It's great talking to 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](http://cdsp.edu)