



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.

Jeckonia Okoth: This is Jeckonia, simply Jey, from Church Divinity School of the Pacific. I'm here with Kaitlyn Reece from Omaha, Nebraska, a second-year Lawrence student at CDSP. Kaity, welcome. Tell us a bit about yourself.

Kaitlyn Reece: Sure. Thank you, Jay, and thank you so much for having me today. I live in Omaha, Nebraska. I grew up in Pasadena, California, and attended college at Creighton University where I met my husband. That's how I ended up in the Midwest. I am a postulant in the Diocese of Nebraska for Holy Orders in my second year as you said. When I'm not in school, I'm also a lobbyist in the Nebraska legislature. I work mostly with nonprofits on issues ranging from refugee settlement to juvenile justice, mental health, and child welfare-related issues. My husband and I have a daughter, and we have a cat. That's what makes up my household here.

Jaconia: That's really cool. What is one question you have encountered in the classroom that has sparked curiosity related to ministry or your vocation?

Kaitlyn: Absolutely. During the fall semester, I took Adapting Christian Formation with professor Kyle Oliver. As part of our experience, we were invited to design course material. I designed a book study for adults using Anthony Ray Hinton's memoir, *The Sun Does Shine*. That was the basis of our discussion together. Anthony Ray Hinton spent 30 years on Alabama's death row.

As chair of Balancing the Scales of Justice, a ministry in the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska focused on developing faithful witnesses to criminal justice reform. It was important to me that the materials that we created for the class would be useful and would be applicable to the ministry I was doing with Balancing the Scales. We used *The*

Sun Does Shine as the basis for our book study. We had previously done book club meetings on titles like *The New Jim Crow* and *Just Mercy*.

The Sun Does Shine was a great way, because it's a firsthand account of how the criminal justice system, particularly as it relates to capital punishment, is broken, and the role that systemic racism plays in determining whether those who are accused of crimes live or die. In designing the book study, I relied heavily on the work of Anne Streaty Wimberly and her concept of story linking in one of the texts on African-American Christian education as the basis for our study.

Together, we linked the stories in the Bible; Joseph in prison, and the imprisonment of Paul and Silas in the New Testament and Acts, to link their stories in the Bible with Anthony Ray Hinton's story and ultimately our stories. We ended our time together designing greeting cards for individuals in Nebraska's prisons, including on death row. We had a whole bunch of stamps and markers and pencils, and together we created greeting cards and sent them out to folks after the event. This is a study that we hope to offer again in other parishes in the diocese in the Easter season.

Jeckonia: If I hear you right, your vocation will be more of an interplay between the pulpit and a ministry aimed at restoring human dignity, right?

Kaitlyn: Yes. Absolutely.

This week, I attended Ash Wednesday services with my family as many likely did. We read from Isaiah 58. It was a really great example for me of how I view my call. Isaiah says, "You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." This passage reminded me of a mural that was at the St. Benedict Monastery and Retreat Center in Skyler, Nebraska where I did my vocational retreat for the diocese a few years ago. In the mural was a picture of Miriam, and she's standing in the middle of the Red Sea. It's not so much she's holding up her tambourine, it's very clear that it's Miriam that we're looking at.

The artistic rendering which has a lot of really bright, vivid rainbow colors makes her appear as not so much that she's crossing the Red Sea, but that she is standing in the middle and repairing it. There's barbed wire that crisscrosses the bottom of the scene, and yet she's disrupting the damaged barbs that are there, the twisted wire at the bottom. Then and now I see myself as a repairer of the breach. For me, repairer looks like standing in the breach and refusing to look away even when it's easier and less painful to look away or to do something else. It's standing there firm with the people who are on the underside of so many of our systems. That's where I feel called to stand and to preach.

Jeckonia: That's really cool. What is one event or issue happening in the world that has impacted how you view ministry today?

Kaitlyn: For me, ever since I was in middle school, the organizing issue has been the death penalty and the abolition of the death penalty. I remember in 2001 watching the video coverage of Timothy McVeigh's execution, and getting down on my knees and praying for mercy for Timothy McVeigh, for all of the people implicated in the execution, and especially for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing that I had watched on TV several years earlier when I was home sick from school.

In high school I thought I would be an attorney that would represent individuals on death row. In college I took a course, faith and political action, which changed the trajectory of my life and my ministry. As part of that course, I worked with Nebraskans Against the Death Penalty and a local Roman Catholic non-profit organization to organize around raising awareness on the Catholic Church's position on the death penalty. As part of that, we met with then-archbishop of Omaha, Elden Curtiss, to encourage him to submit a pastoral letter to all the area congregations in support of the repeal of the death penalty, and we visited individuals on Nebraska's death row.

After my class was over, I continued as a student organizer for Nebraskans Against the Death Penalty where I organized letter-writing events to build up grassroots support for death penalty abolition in Nebraska and toy drives for children of incarcerated parents. My husband and I got married. We moved away for a couple of years, and when we came back in 2012, beginning in 2013, I began working as a legislative aide for a state senator in the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature. While I was there, Nebraska became state, the first Republican state, I might add, in 30 years to repeal the death penalty.

While I was working for my senator, I wrote floor speeches, I responded to constituents, and I helped with floor strategy. I still have a signed copy of the bill that the sponsor, Senator Ernie Chambers, who is Nebraska's longest-serving state senator, he signed for me a few weeks after the veto override. I know people listening to this podcast can't see it, but actually, you can see behind me is a copy of the bill on my wall.

The success proved short-lived after a referendum reinstated the death penalty on the ballot in 2016. I still keep the bill copy on my wall to remind me of what's possible. I still hold out hope that Nebraska and so many places in the United States and around the world will open their eyes to the injustice of capital punishment, and the great harm it inflicts on all of us when we allow the state to take life in our name.

Jeckonia: It seems you're so convinced about the dignity of life that you're willing to do anything in your power to do away with the death penalty. Tell us more about why this conviction or where this conviction comes from.

Kaitlyn: That's a great question. I think a lot of it comes from my maternal grandfather. When my mom was little, he wrote-- My mom's one of eight children. My grandfather is, or was for a long time, he's retired now, a plaintiff attorney for personal injury. He was a personal injury attorney. He would write my mom and her siblings children of God letters

in which he would encourage them and help them to see how they were children of God and called to act as children of God in the world.

That's something that has never left me, that we are all children of God, and we are all, as Sister Helen Prejean says, more than the worst thing we've ever done. I've certainly made my share of mistakes, and, by God's grace, I'm forgiven. I know that that's true for others too. The current systems that we have around criminal justice keep people trapped in the worst thing that they've ever done. That's all we see when there's so much more to each of those broken people just as there's so much more to us than our brokenness.

Jeckonia: Thank you so much. What has been one creative or experimental ministry opportunity you have explored and/or encountered over the last year that has inspired you?

Kaitlyn: I am an Episcopal Evangelism Society or EES Grant recipient, and I'm really grateful for the support that Day Pritchard Smith and EES has provided me in the past year and made a creative ministry that I'm going to talk about possible. I'm also really grateful to Bishop Scott Barker, my bishop here in Nebraska, who has long supported me in the work of Balancing the Scales of Justice.

This fall as part of our diocese annual council or annual convention, I organized a public witness vigil in support of voting rights restoration for citizens returning from prison. In Nebraska, currently, returning citizens have to wait two years after the completion of their sentence, and that includes any time on parole or probation before they are eligible to vote. It used to be a lifetime ban. We eliminated that about a decade ago. However, with the probation and parole requirements, that means someone could wait 15, 20 plus years before they're eligible to vote even though they've been living in the community for all of that time.

I worked with a local graphic designer, we designed T-shirts, tote bags, and commemorative posters for the event. In the weeks beforehand, I partnered with ACLU, Nebraska to offer an educational webinar to annual council participants to help raise awareness about the discriminatory practice and the ways in which voting rights for people returning from prison goes back to the very founding of Nebraska and is deeply tied to Jim Crow laws here in the state. I coordinated with local non-profit organizations to identify system-impacted individuals that were willing to join us in the vigil.

I'm an oblate candidate at the Benedictine Way, which is a new Episcopal community in Omaha, and I've worked with them to design a prayer service as part of our vigil. With the generous support of EES, I secured a videographer to record the vigil and conduct interviews with participants. Together, the day of the vigil, we designed handwritten posters which we carried from the half-mile walk from the church basement to the steps of the Nebraska Capitol.

In the end, nearly 30 Episcopalians, scientists, journalists, mothers, fathers, parents, deacons, priests, monks, and a bishop joined together as we walked and we sang *Amazing Grace*. Once we arrived at the Capitol, we heard from Bishop Barker, justice-impacted individuals, and were joined by a state senator who has long supported this issue. The event for me encapsulates what it means to engage in public ministry as a seeker of justice.

Jeckonia: It seems your life revolves around the dignity of the human nature and its restoration, social justice. Where and how do you sense God calling you to live into your vocation beyond your ministry, your sending experience?

Kaitlyn: When I applied for the EES grant, I thought I'd be helping other people find their voices as prophetic witnesses. As a former staff person and as an advocate, I was often used to being the person behind the scenes, and the grant really turned that on its head. What's been surprising for me, but I imagine is not surprising to God, is that in the process of helping others find their voices, I found mine. With two years left in the low-res MDiv program at CDSP, I'm not sure exactly what shape my ministry will take after graduation.

Professor Oliver's class introduced me to a new type of ministry called movement chaplaincy through the Work of Faith Matters Network. Then last August, I read with great interest an article in the Episcopal News Service about Nadia Bolz-Weber's installation as a pastor of public witness. Those are some inspiring trends that I hope to continue to explore in my coursework and my ministry here in Nebraska over the next few years. I know wherever I go and whatever I do, it'll be as a repairer, as a prophetic witness to the redeeming and restoring love of God.

Jaconia: Kaity, do you see your ministry going beyond Nebraska and the US into other cultures, probably continents?

Kaitlyn: It's a great question. I think a part of my heart will always belong to Nebraska. It has been such a welcoming community for myself and for my family. My daughter was born here. My husband was raised here from when he was in second grade. I was actually born in Omaha, but we moved away when I was five. In many ways, when I started college at Creighton University, it felt like coming home. One of the joys of my work in the unicameral as a lobbyist is helping to translate some of the unique nature of Nebraska's unicameral. We're a one-body house, we're officially nonpartisan, and helping people understand what that means and harness the power that comes with such a small and unique body.

This session, for example, I've been organizing a series of advocacy trainings for frontline staff with several local nonprofits to help educate and inform them about the political process in Nebraska and how they can get involved and how their voice can really make a difference. Whether my call ends or begins in Nebraska, I know that the

people I've met here and the people I've gotten to know and the time we spent together is never going to leave me.

Jaconia: What is the final word of encouragement you have for those listening to this episode, especially the CDSP community?

Kaitlyn: I want to first by noting that I began seminary in June 2020. I have never set foot on campus as a CDSP student. I did have the fortune of being able to go on campus for one of the SeeCDSP weekends in December 2019, but that's the last time that I've been to Berkeley. I'm really grateful for the flexibility that CDSP's program has offered in allowing my family to remain in Nebraska while I attend seminary, which has been an important priority for me and for my husband. We have a young daughter. It's also provided me the opportunity to engage in some really rich and meaningful ministry, some of which we've talked about here today.

None of that would have been possible without the low-residency program. I know for some people, a New Year's practice is to choose a word that is their focus for the upcoming year. With the Nebraska legislature starting in January, I usually choose resolutions or words or things like that not on a typical calendar year. If I were to select a word that summarizes my year of learning at CDSP and my reason for hope amid so much sorrow and turmoil, it would be solidarity. Indeed, solidarity lies at the heart of my theology. It's through the solidarity of Jesus with us that humanity experiences salvation, that I experience salvation.

Disappointment, rejection, fear, anger, sadness, these are some of the many emotions those of us at CDSP and around the world are feeling during these difficult times. As we record this episode, we are in a period of grief and transition in our CDSP community and in our world. I long deeply for the time where I could meet my classmates face to face, and hopefully, we get to meet face to face one day, Jay. Just as my heart aches for peace and justice in the Ukraine, in Afghanistan, and in so many places of hurt and injustice around the world.

My heart is weary. I know I'm not alone in that. Yet, amidst the sorrow, pain, and loss, I have hope. I can stand in the gap seeking repair and restoration knowing that Jesus stood there first. I can rest in the knowledge that the sorrow, pain, and longing I experience is not unknown to God because it was shared by God's own son, Jesus. Jesus is present to our pain. Let us not look away.

Jeckonia: That's well said. Jesus said, in this world you'll have trouble, but take heart, you'll overcome for I've overcome. Kaity, thanks so much for joining us on Crossings Conversations. I just want to wish you a wonderful weekend. I know you're getting into the evening. Enjoy your weekend before you get into another grueling week. Thank you so much.

Kaitlyn: Thank you for having me.

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