



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 from Church Divinity School of the Pacific. I'm here with the Reverend Edwin Johnson, rector of St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Edwin, welcome.

Edwin Johnson: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Kyle: We asked you to be a part of this alumni interview series because we know that you have been involved with the Presiding Officer's Advisory Group on Beloved Community Implementation in the Episcopal Church. That's a bit of a mouthful. I'm wondering if you can unpack for us what that is, what the actual group is, and your role. Then tell us a little bit about that ministry.

Edwin: Amen. It is absolutely a mouthful, no question about that. I think we've spent the better part of the last several years trying to figure out a better way of describing it, and we haven't. So there we are. Nonetheless, the work has been absolutely amazing. It grew out of general convention so rewinding which feels like a long way away going back to our general convention in Austin, Texas. I was the chair of committee nine, which is on racial justice and reconciliation.

As that committee, there were a couple of pieces of work that we really committed the church to. One was making sure that we were funding and resourcing and supporting the work of becoming beloved community, the work of dismantling racism in a deeply contextual way because one size does not fit all. Two, making sure that we are allowing and facilitating having everyone who is doing that contextual work, be in the kinds of relationships and in collaboration with each other to support that work. That's really where it came from.

To put it really plainly, it was a matter of giving grants and gathering people through summits. When the convention finished and the funding thing thankfully was supported and we moved ahead, the time came to figure out who was going to do this work in between conventions. What's interesting is that at that convention in Austin, Texas, my partner was pregnant with our second child. I purposely did not put my name in for any of the interim bodies. I said, "You know what? I'm going to be way too busy. We're about to have this baby." Roughly a month or so after Santiago, our younger son was born, the call did come to chair this particular committee and so here I am.

Kyle: [chuckles] Here you are.

Edwin: Over these past now more than two years, the committee has put forth four different rounds of grants. All of these grants have been really targeted to supporting the building of movements around racial justice and racial reconciliation.

Then the summit aspect has obviously been very much impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We had organized and planned a fabulous summit to take place, to actually begin on El Cinco de Mayo, May 5th in 2020. Even as things were starting to creep up a little bit, we figured we would still have it. Well that had changed, and we ended up doing a virtual summit that was also very successful. Since then we've done some smaller gatherings.

That's what we've been up to for the most part. It has been quite the ride. The community that's been gathered around this work has been really the most prophetic, wise, and passionate group of people I've ever had the chance to work with, representing all geographical corners of the Episcopal Church, representing the different ethnic groups, representing different classes and genders and everything. It's been fabulous leading this group and really just walking alongside them as they figure everything out.

Kyle: You talked about giving these targeted grants in different regions and to different bodies and organizations. I'm wondering if there's maybe one or two approaches that have been proposed and funded in some particular communities that you might tell us a little bit about so people can picture this work a little bit better.

Edwin: Yes, absolutely. There are so many wonderful examples that I can think about, the ones I raise up. Many of these projects have been around lifting up the voices and the stories of people whose voices and stories have largely been marginalized. We had the chance to really focus on helping people use different media, use different resources available to them, and to us, to lift things up. As an example, there's a group in Connecticut that is predominantly Haitian and Haitian-American.

One of the things that we funded with them is a film project in Haitian-Creole that would allow them to talk about the past where they come from but also their present. To tell it in their own words, in their own languages, from their own perspectives, and to have a voice that would obviously be valuable in and amongst them as they can hear the

stories and share their stories with each other, while also being something that is really unique that we can share with the rest of the church. That's one example.

On the other end, one question that we asked ourselves, especially heading into the second round of grants that were shortly after George Floyd, that were very much rapid response, is how are these grants saving lives? Are these grants saving lives? Those are big questions we asked. One of the programs that we funded was a group that was collaborating with a conglomeration of Black nurses.

What they were doing was providing spiritual, emotional, some financial, and other forms of support to really center around this group of folks who were on the frontline of the pandemic who were disadvantaged for financial and racial reasons and to build a partnership to save the lives and to at least support the lives of those that were saving lives. That was phenomenal and it was really neat to see how that came together.

The last thing I'll mention because there's so many, but also projects around really saving and maintaining aspects of culture and language. Throughout our church, throughout our country, there are several languages, especially amongst Native American members of our community that are not approaching extinction per se, but nonetheless would be in need of some support and some excitement. It's been great to be able to fund and support that as well.

Kyle: Very cool. It seems like a common thread in some of this work is finding ways of identifying and celebrating and lifting up, maybe you can help me put my finger on it, stories and cultural resources and experiences. Is it fair to say that part of what this work has been about has been about really celebrating Beloved Community? If so, do you think that's been maybe surprising to some of the people who have maybe been coming at this work for the very first time. Does that question make sense?

Edwin: Absolutely. Celebration has been an enormous part of the work, and it's been a part of the work that we've really been encouraging. One thing that I've experienced, for example, as a Black and Latino man, is that so many times people who'll talk with me or ask me questions about my experience, it's always about the things that are difficult about it. It's always about the struggles. It's always about what's going wrong. Yes, those things exist.

Nonetheless, I think the stories that I tell them that I continue to yearn to tell are the stories of our joy, the stories of our resilience, the stories of the resources that have allowed us to not just survive, but thrive and transform our church and transform the places that we find ourselves. That's something that we really wanted to lift up because this work is work of the long haul, and I think we're only going to have the energy for it if we are tapping into the joy and resilience also. That's something that we've made sure to do. In addition to that, obviously, a lot of harder work, or just different kinds of work has happened as well.

One thing that I didn't mention, but nonetheless represents a lot of what we've supported is a lot of work around helping privileged folks, so in this case, mainly white folks, really figure out how to best organize and do their own work. It's been great working with several organizations and several congregations that have taken approaches to that that then they've been able to share with other people. The wonderful thing is that if you have white people and privileged communities really committing to doing their own work, then there becomes space not just to celebrate the joy and the resilience but also to multiply it.

For us, it was really moving to hear so many stories of communities say we've neglected this for over 100 years, and now is the time for us to face this, now is the time for us to do this.

Kyle: Amen. You talked about the summit and the pivot that happened there. Could you say more about the kinds of sharing--? I guess my question is, was that largely about these different organizations sharing their experience with each other, sharing their learnings? If so, are there ways that people who might not be on one of these funded projects can tap into some of what these groups are learning?

Edwin: We had several events. The first event that we had was shortly after when the in-person summit would have been held. That was largely one that gave space to sharing learnings. It was focused on people we've funded or people who've been doing the work for a really long time. Overall, people emerged from that, I think, feeling like they were better able to make connections with people doing similar work or people doing different work, but with the regionality where it made sense to work with each other anyway. That was the first event.

I think really the centerpiece of the summit work we've done was a three-day event that took place in the summer that had three days with different focuses. With each one, they allow people at different stages, both those doing the work for a long time and those figuring this out for the first time, to really step in and that was really great. All of those thankfully were recorded and all the presentations, all the everything. Each one of those events we had up to 1,000 subscribers, up to 1,000 people who could attend, and each one of those events actually overbooked. It was exciting to get that much participation. It felt really successful, and we've been able to continue that momentum as well.

Kyle: Great. If you don't mind, I'd like to shift gears a little bit and reflect a bit on ways that your theological preparation at CDSP may have shaped how you've engaged with this work. Are there things that you're grateful for from your seminary days as you've gone about this, things you wish you'd had? I'd love to hear more about that.

Edwin: Absolutely. I think CDSP really set me up for this work in, I think, intentional ways and in unintentional ways. For me, CDSP felt like a cultural immersion in a way. I'd grown up in fairly diverse environments, definitely more majority of color, but between my high school and college I've been around large groups of white people. One thing

that I'd never done, I'd actually never prayed with white people before. I remember showing up to the retreat, and I was one of just a handful of students of color, and everybody was singing hymns that they knew, and everything about the worship felt so foreign to me. I remember thinking to myself like, "Dang, I'm going to have to do this for three years."

[laughter]

It was wild, and I laugh about it. Truth be told, I loved praying with my classmates at CDSP. I learned to appreciate the 1982 hymnal in ways I never thought possible. All that was wonderful. Nonetheless, I think it showed me that for our church to truly have a space for everyone, that it was going to take a level of discomfort on the part of those who were most comfortable. I saw that as my classmates tried on worship that I was bringing to the community through experimental liturgies. I saw that through the different kinds of conversations that we were having.

To have that experience, I think for me was really helpful because I saw it work well even in a place where I was unfortunately a fairly extreme minority. That was one thing, I think the theological preparation that I got at CDSP was wonderful. I took a constructed theology course with Dr. Marion Grau. One thing that I loved about that is it gave me the opportunity to really overlay the theology I was studying and beginning to attempt to create with what was going on around me. We had chances at the beginning of class to give reflection theological reflections.

I remember bringing in some rap lyrics that I was hearing in a totally different way because of what I learned from that class. Where have I gone since then? I think, for me, it's allowed me to see and understand things theologically, and integrate that into everything I do. Obviously, my preaching has impacted this work of Beloved Community as well. When we use words like beloved community, we talk about the kingdom of God.

My training at CDSP allows me to understand how these words are both fruitful and loaded in ways that allow us to use them in helpful ways, and also in ways that implore us to be careful with how we use them also. That was wonderful. That was great preparation for me. Finally, I think the support on contextual education. I was blessed to do a field education in two really different contexts, at a predominantly Mexican and Mexican-American church in San Jose that was in Spanish and gave me that experience that was really unique and wonderful, and then at a predominantly Afro-Caribbean church in Oakland as well.

The chance not just to have those experiences, but to reflect about them alongside my classmates, I think helped me see once again, how do people come together? Also, helped me see, what does it mean to be asking these questions within communities within which everybody is a person of color. That's critical work that I'm doing now as I'm currently at my parish, and also working with communities of color throughout the country.

Kyle: Thanks for that. I guess relatedly then, do you have some advice for seminaries, for diocese, for the communities that you engage with through the Beloved Community work that you're doing on a national level? Are there a couple of pieces of advice that you would give about how we can do Beloved Community work more effectively and more joyfully and all the rest?

Edwin: Yes, absolutely. I think first and foremost, it starts with relationship, and it starts with the most local relationship that you can possibly muster. One thing that I see in institutions, in schools, and in churches is oftentimes groups will say, "Okay, we want to think about and address racism. We want to build relationships with people who are really different from us." Oftentimes, the first place they go is more far afield than from those who are right around them.

I think what I would say to anyone who is really serious about learning about the work of Beloved Community, that is really serious about doing the work of Beloved Community, becoming Beloved Community, is look right around you. Who's in your neighborhood, who's in your family, who's next to you in class, and start there because oftentimes those closest to us are going to be those that have the clearest sense of how we're actually doing. Oftentimes, that work is more challenging than being in a more theoretical or perhaps even just some more distant space.

I'd implore anyone to do that. If we're talking about seminaries, talking about institutions, now I think the question is, if we're really serious about Beloved Community, what does it mean for the folks who are right outside of your walls, right outside of the campus? One of the most formative things I did during seminary is I worked with at-risk high school students who were in and out of the criminal justice system at Berkeley High School.

For me, when I think about Berkeley, I think about those students and I think about their families. Most of my classmates didn't have that experience. Can experiences like that that are meaningful and impactful, and have good outcomes for these other people involved, can experience like that be more common? Because I think when they are, then wherever we are, we'll be able to create Beloved Community so much more effectively.

Kyle: I'm trying to find a formulation of this question. As you're hearing from communities that have really taken up that particular call, and really started with relationship nearby, are there some stories you've heard or some learnings? It's just what happens when we start this the right way? What are you hearing from folks?

Edwin: Oftentimes, so what I've heard, is those neighbors, those folks nearby will, often talk about having waited for this moment for a really long time. When I think about some of the communities we've worked with, we have this church, that this Episcopal Church has been in its area for a long time, and have these Baptist neighbors. They see these neighbors at marches and functions and gatherings. They will occasionally invite these

neighbors to things, but never had the two met within Bible study and connected with each other.

The beautiful thing is that we've been able to walk with them as they've done this for the first time. Every single time they say, "We've been waiting for this moment. We are ready to work with you. We're excited to work with you." This isn't to say that those nearest to you are often very excited about it. Oftentimes, those close to us are those who've been most hurt by us. Nonetheless, I find that that work has often been the most long time coming. Even through the pain and difficulty and awkwardness of it ends up yielding the most fruit right away.

Kyle: Wow, that's powerful. To close, I'm going to give you a chance to testify. Not you haven't been throughout. From your vantage point, is there just anything else you would want folks to know about this work, how it's impacted you, how it's impacting communities? Any last words for us from where you're sitting?

Edwin: Yes. First and foremost, I've learned a ton. I've learned a lot about Beloved Community. I've learned a lot about cultures different from mine. Within the Episcopal Church, at least here in the United States, and as someone who's Black and Latino, as someone's come from where I've come from and my family, I am often put in the position of a teacher, of explainer, of somebody who gets it. One wonderful thing is, especially alongside my non-binary siblings who are part of this work, alongside my Asian/Pacific American siblings, and also the Indigenous folks, is I've learned a lot.

I've learned ways that I'm perpetuating things that are difficult from other people. I've learned ways that perhaps me and my communities can collaborate more effectively. That's been great. I feel like I am emerging from this leadership position having just become a better human, a better Christian, a better follower of Jesus, a better dad, a better everything, in part because I've had to grow to do this work too. That's something that I am deeply grateful for, and I want to put out there because sometimes there are those of us who become the experts or the teachers. I can attest that I've learned so much more than I've taught. I can really say that. That's something that I've put out there.

Another thing is that it's been so much fun. It's been absolutely so much fun. For one, within Episcopal contexts to be in gatherings that are so overwhelmingly of color and diversity has just been great. I've really enjoyed that. On top of that, I think just to know that everyone is as in love with the church as I am, if not more, and that everyone is also as committed to the vision of what the church can be has made it just deeply enjoyable. I feel like this work, I've had the chance to make some amazing friends and they'll be friends for a lifetime. That's been wonderful, it's been great, and I've been super excited about it as well.

The last thing I'll say is that it's also just deeply personal for me. I've mentioned perhaps at the beginning that now I'm also a father. My sons, Francisco and Santiago, are coming up in a world that isn't always excited about their presence. For me, the work

we're doing right now makes me feel like wherever the world is, wherever this country is, that the church is going to be more so. That is enough to get me up to do it again and again and again all the time. It's been a great blessing. It's been wonderful. I would do it again a million times over. I'm looking forward to where the next call will be.

Kyle: Edwin Johnson, thank you so, so much for your time and your insight, for your leadership in this ministry, and for sharing a bit with our listeners about what you've been up to and about Beloved Community hopefully in all our contexts as we continue to engage in this moment.

Edwin: Thanks for having me. This has been fun.

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