



**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:** This is Kyle Oliver, from Church Divinity School of the Pacific. I am here with Weston Morris, a first-year MDiv student at CDSP and Co-Founder of Welcoming Every Body. Weston, welcome.

**Weston:** Thank you for having me, Kyle.

**Kyle:** To start things off, the floor is yours. I'd love to just hear a bit about your story and about your journey, however you'd like to share that with us?

**[00:00:51] Weston:** This is completely non-scripted, but as Kyle said, my name is Weston. I use he/him or they/them pronouns. I just moved to the Bay this summer, in preparation for coming to CDSP for my MDiv. Before that, I was in Denver, Colorado for a few years doing the Episcopal Service Corps so I'm actually an alum of the Episcopal Service Corps for two years. Before that, I came from North Carolina where I grew up and went to college and had most of my really big Episcopal formation in the church in North Carolina.

I am really interested in welcoming everybody into the church. One of my passions— I'm a transgender man, so I transitioned when I was in college and didn't really feel like there was a place for me as a trans person in the church. I didn't have any role models. I didn't have a whole lot of faith [laughs] that the church was going to be ready for me, even if I was technically ready for it. I experienced a lot of turmoil over that, and eventually came to the conclusion that I don't get to choose what I'm called to. [laughs]

I'm actually a postulant for Holy Orders now out of the diocese of North Carolina. In the last few years, I've done a lot of work in the disability justice world. Really trying to engage with the disabled community in a way that is meaningful and not ableist, which

is really hard in the church because we don't really talk about ableism. There are lots and lots of things in scripture that are problematic when it comes to the way that we talk about disability and embodiment.

There's a lot to go on from there, but I am really passionate about us living into the embodiment that we're given by God through being alive, and making the most of whatever that reality is, and removing barriers for people's engagement regardless of body. I think my trans identity is really important to my understanding of that because the way that bodies interact with the world says a whole lot about who we can be and our theology. That was a whole lot. [laughs]

**Kyle:** Thank you. It was a really rich way to start our conversation. I'm thinking about where we might go from here. I guess for starters if we could talk more about Welcoming Every Body? Did I get the pronunciation of the organization right as it were? [chuckles]

**Weston:** Yes, you did.

**Kyle:** You talked about your passion for this work, and I'm curious to hear more about how your organization got started, and who you help equip and how, in that very task?

**Weston:** I think it's a great question. I officially started Welcoming Every Body with a priest friend of mine in Denver named Tori. I think that both of us have been doing the work of welcoming everybody for quite a while before we officially started the organization. Really, we got together about month three of COVID, and I was finishing out my second year in the Episcopal Service Corps and wasn't really sure what direction I was going to go in after that.

COVID was making things really unclear. I knew that I still wanted to do stuff in the church, and I knew where my passion was. I knew that I had built up a lot of skills of advocacy and also education when it comes to identity. We sat down and we decided that we would start to try to engage with local communities in Colorado around the issue of inclusion of trans identities in churches because I think the Episcopal Church has a really a better reputation you might say than a lot of other denominations when it comes to LGB inclusion and talking about the welcoming of gay and lesbian people into our congregations.

In my experience, that doesn't translate really to the welcoming of trans people. The experience is vastly different. Coming out as queer is very different than coming out as trans, and the theology around gender and sexuality. They're fluid and they play on one another, but it is just a really different lived experience to be trans in church. We noticed that there were a lot of congregations in Colorado, specifically that were interested in this topic, because if you'll talk to pretty much any youth minister, they have trans youth in their youth groups or gender queer, questioning, gender fluid people. It's just a really important topic right now, because it's getting a lot more air time.

We said we have this expertise and knowledge, and there seems to be a desire and a need to support congregations in working through their own process of understanding what being trans means, what being trans in church means and what being inclusive of trans people in church is all about, and how you can do that in a way that is done well, that doesn't make trans people feel additionally marginalized, or called out or uncomfortable in any way.

**Kyle:** What is it when you come alongside a congregation who is perhaps beginning this work, perhaps continuing this work might feel, I'm using my imagination here so fill in if I'm getting this wrong, perhaps has good intentions but not necessarily a lot of expertise about how to proceed, how do you come alongside that congregation and what do those educative processes look like?

**Weston:** We've learned a lot about this. Not every congregation is the same. We would like to start in the same place every time, but the reality is we can't. It really depends on the congregation, but if we're starting from step one, we start with the concept of identity in general. It is mind-blowing to people that they have a gender identity, even if they don't know that they have one, they have one. That's honestly where we have to begin a lot of the time, is just the basics of what is gender? Who has gender? The answer is everyone. How does that change your world?

Starting with the individual so they can have a little bit of a concept of this is where this person is coming from to this conversation so that they can have a little bit more empathy with the people in the room who have been discussing this in their brains for years. That's a place to begin. We also do for congregations that are a little bit further in this discussion who may have had some identity training in the past or talk about LGBT issues in general. We may be able to just go straight into what it means to be trans and the diversity of gender identities and how that differs from sexual orientation, or sexual identity I should say. It's important that we use the term sexual identity and not orientation.

There's so many directions that that can go for example, one congregation may be super interested in knowing the theology of trans-inclusion, like how do we discuss trans-theology and gender in general when it comes to biblical topics?

It does tend to be a really vulnerable space for people because if you imagine the standard Episcopal congregant, who's maybe we're going to say 60 and is a cis person, has been in straight relationships their whole life, is white, is not really thinking about identity. For somebody to come in and say you have this and think about how that has changed your life and what things in your life would be different if your gender was different, that can be a really, really hard place to be for people for the first time. It's really important that the space be set up in a way that is non-judgmental and seeks to be open and also honest. I think being real people in the room is very important too.

**Kyle:** I guess there's a couple directions we could go from here. I wanted to ask you if you're willing to talk a little bit about *Crip Camp* because that was how the person who

got us connected introduced you and your ministry and your work. A shift, I think from the gender identity side of the conversation to the disability justice of the conversation. Can you tell us a little bit, what is *Crip Camp* and how have you been involved?

**Weston:** *Crip Camp*, if you're not aware, is a documentary by two wonderful people, Jim LeBrecht is one of the co-directors, and Nicole Newnham is the other. Jim is a disabled person. He has spina bifida. He's been disabled his whole life. When he was young, he went to a camp in upstate New York that was pretty radical and revolutionary. It was a camp for disabled kids where they got to be exactly themselves. He remembered at this camp, they had a, I'm going to pause and back up because the story is not in line so I'm just going to pause.

Jim goes to this camp and meets all of these people with all different kinds of disabilities and got to interact with other disabled people for the first time. What was magical about it is that a lot of folks from the camp ended up going on to start the Disability Rights Movement. It was the relationships between the kids at the camp that built the foundation on which this movement was started. *Crip Camp* is a film, not just about the camp, but it's about how the relationships that were built at this camp went on to change the whole world, and resulted in things like the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is *massive*.

I don't know how this happened, but by the Grace of God, I got to spend this last year doing a lot of administrative work for the directors of *Crip Camp*. Pretty much, I answered all the emails that were from anywhere in the world about *Crip Camp* and how to stream it, and how to get access to it. I agreed to do this before *Crip Camp* got nominated for an Oscar.

I do want to bring it back to ministry though, because I think what *Crip Camp* did was radically welcoming to people of every body. It doesn't matter which disability you have, how your body was messing with your brain that day, or what meds you were on, or what your ability to swim was, or walk was, or hear was. The engagement was an expectation that you would be included regardless. Everyone had the right to talk and to be who they were in that space. I think we can learn a lot as a church by emanating and mirroring that kind of welcome, rather than questioning whether people deserve to be anywhere. Just don't ask that question. Of course, people deserve to be places and to be included. Is that not our mission as the church?

**Kyle:** Thank you. This is so rich, but I want to be realistic about the time so I'd love to shift gears again, and I suspect it's possible that some of these themes may cycle back again. I'd like to think of this next section of the interview as a lightning round, where in a brief way we explore a couple of these questions about your time and your hopes at CDSP. To start, I just would love to hear more about what interested you in studying with us at CDSP?

**Weston:** Many things. I will first off start with, we just talked about *Crip Camp*, but both of the directors of *Crip Camp*, and the producer, and a lot of the people in the film, who

were at *Crip Camp*, also live in the bay. So that was being a witness too, and being able to make community with those people in person was a really big draw. Outside of that, when I got postulancy in January of this year, I knew that I was going to need to go to get an MDiv and being from the south, I knew a bit of the landscape of seminaries that were going to be options for me.

I looked at all of their websites and I said, Church Divinity School of the Pacific has the most accessible financial aid information and has the most appropriate gender language on the website. I can't emphasize enough that it was really seeing that they already use words like spouses and partners or spouses/partners, or asked for pronouns on forms. There are some language things that were clear signs that I wasn't going to be the only queer trans person at the school. Not only that I wouldn't be the only one, that I wouldn't be the first, and I have been the first for a lot of spaces.

I was speaking to a friend of mine who is a priest and she said, "Weston, you deserve to go to a place where you're going to be nurtured as exactly who you are and you don't have to work so hard," because I wanted to learn, and so when it really came down to it, I only applied to CDSP. I knew in my bones really that this was where I was supposed to go. I'd never been to the bay before we drove in with the U-Haul and the cats. [laughs] It was really a leap of faith, but it's not the first time I've gone somewhere for a big thing that I didn't know was coming. Those are really the major reasons.

**Kyle:** Great. Next step, I'd love to hear more about-- I know lots of things can change in seminary, but for the time being, where you are now? How are you hoping to serve, now and in the future? What are you hoping that your MDiv at CDSP is going to equip you to do in the church and in the world?

**Weston:** There's a lot there. Firstly, I'll talk now. CDSP is on what we call Holy Hill. It is not accessible. It is not an accessible campus. I know from both personal experience and from anecdotal evidence that I'm not the first person to notice this, and I know that there have been people excluded from that education at CDSP for the sole reason that it is not an accessible place. I would really love to up CDSP's game. I would love to help Trinity and CDSP figure out what they need to figure out in order to do that because I can see that CDSP is on the cutting edge of many theological conversations.

Yes. It's important for us-- this is where I was going, I'll start again. The Episcopal church as we know is an aging population. In a lot of ways that makes-- everyone will become disabled at some point, whether or not we call it that is one thing, but that's just the truth of being alive in bodies. Secondly, there is tremendous potential in growth in the Church by making spaces where people's embodiment isn't a barrier to participation.

I've seen that play out in really interesting ways in COVID with virtual worship options and virtual communities. I know that a lot of people are really tired of Zoom, and it's a really accessible option. If you are doing liturgy well, and if you are doing community building well, it is not a problem to not be in person. Yes, sacramentally, there are some

problems there, and that's not exactly what I'm talking about, but I think that people sometimes try to hide behind the not being in person thing as a way to say like, "I'm not engaging with the community because we're not in person" when the reality is a lot of people who are disabled don't get the option of engaging in in-person community, and being online is the accessible thing, and to minimize that form of communication is really ableist.

**Kyle:** Yes. Anything else you want to say about what you're hoping this time at CDSP will launch you toward?

**Weston:** I'd love to be a priest. [chuckles] I'm a postulant, which is a huge step. My dream is to run a potentially ecumenical, but also potentially Episcopal— I don't really know how it would come about— but a community church that was based out of a greenhouse, and grow plants together. Have a stained-glass greenhouse where we do worship and mutual aid and have delicious food and wonderful growing things that would be accessible for as many people as possible. That's a dream.

I also am really interested in death justice and working with, not necessarily in hospice because I think that there are some connotations about hospice that I want to stay away from, but just dying people in general and the way that we do and don't pay attention to people when they are dying, and who gets what access to resources. Who is in the nursing homes that are too full that have no money that don't have space? How can we bring dignity into the end/beginning of whatever death is? I'm excited to see how CDSP continues to form me in that way.

**Kyle:** That's beautiful. Thank you. I'm going to bask in the image of a stained-glass greenhouse for the rest of the day. That's a beautiful posture to want to have to community and to ministry.

Weston, this has been a real pleasure. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. Welcome to CDSP.

**Weston:** Thank you.

**Kyle:** Have a good rest of your first week of seminary classes, and we are really grateful to get to share your story and the story of other CDSP students with the larger CDSP community in the coming days, so thank you.

**Weston:** Great, thanks.

**Kyle:** If you'd like to learn more about Weston Morris' ministry, you can check out [welcomingeverybody.com](http://welcomingeverybody.com).

**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

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