



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, and I'm here with the Reverend Christie Fleming, Missioner for Community Care and Reconciliation in the Episcopal Church in Western Louisiana, and director of the Lighthouse homeless ministry. Christie, welcome.

Christie Fleming: Thank you. Wonderful to be here.

Kyle: This is a series of conversations that we're having with some CDSP alums who are doing interesting work, and I thought we could start by just asking you very broadly to tell us about your ministry at the Lighthouse. What is it? What's your work like there? Anything else you want to share?

Christie: I opened the ministry about a year ago, end of September of last year. When I moved to rural Northeast Louisiana a little over four years ago, I made friends with a number of homeless people. I was a chaplain to the homeless in San Diego and in San Francisco. I made a number of friends, and it became clear over time, I was serving at a church full-time, but it became clear that a shelter was needed and eventually I decided to open it. We're open seven days a week. We offer three meals a day. I'm working very hard right now to open the overnight ministry. My homeless friends are quite anxious for that to happen. That's what's going on right now with the Lighthouse.

Kyle: Tell us a little more about what the process was like? It's always different how we find ourselves in the situation where we experience some sort of ministry need and then try to go from there to action. I'm curious about what that looked like in the case of the Lighthouse.

Christie: My bishop has been more than supportive. My gosh, has he been supportive, Jake Owensby, he's just fantastic. He said, "What would you like to do, Christie?" He gave me some time to think about it. I said, "How about opening a homeless shelter?" He said, "Do it." I was able to get a monthly donation from the city of Bastrop. Apparently a number of people had talked about opening a homeless shelter, but it's not an easy thing. Fortunately, I was able to do that. That's how it came to being. I had no idea when I graduated from CDSP that I would be doing this in the middle of cornfields. [laughs]

Kyle: Wow. You mentioned these past experiences of having these pastoral relationships with homeless people and different cities where you've lived. How did those past experiences prepare you for the work that you're doing now?

Christie: Oh, it prepared me unbelievably. They taught me so much, and my homeless friends continue to teach me, and did teach me, so much about their lives, their realities, what brought them to that particular situation. There are many different stories. Also, they've taught me that so many of us do not understand our own worth. I've had numerous conversations filled with tears for some who, when we talk about the fact that they are loved by God, they are loved by God even if they walk around in boxer shorts and a torn up t-shirt and flip-flops in San Diego, that doesn't matter.

I'll even say, "What do you think Jesus was wearing? I don't think he was wearing a three-piece suit." [chuckles] They have taught me so much. Also to let go of whatever fear or anxiety I had, and to move forward and know that God is with us always. It was a wonderful experience. It was not difficult to step into this ministry here in Bastrop because I was blessed with that experience.

Kyle: Did you have some experience as well with some of the more formal administrative aspects? I'm just thinking about what a daunting task it must be to run a shelter. I'm curious what that process has been like.

Christie: It has become abundantly clear that I am more of a relational person than an administrative person. I was the spiritual director for the shelters that I worked at before. I had to learn a lot, and I'm still learning. I'm still learning a lot about what needs to happen. Fortunately, as I said earlier, my bishop is so patient and he has a lovely sense of humor because I don't know everything about the administrative part. You're right, it is a challenging job, but we're getting there.

Kyle: Feel free to wave me off of this line of questioning. I tend to be a bit of a process geek, I'm drilling down and down. Is there a recent example of a piece of learning that you've had, of like, "Oh, okay. Well, I feel like I understand this aspect of this work better." I'm curious about if you've got a story or two?

Christie: Well, the thing that I'm having to learn most is that even though I love my homeless friends and we have such good relationships, even with people who are dangerous, and there are a number of people who are, I've learned and am learning

that I need to be stricter with certain things. It breaks my heart. At the same time I've got to do that. I'm still learning to say, "No, I'm sorry. You have to leave." I don't like saying that, but that's the kind of thing that I'm having to learn.

Also administratively we are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and all of that rigmarole is very, very important. It's the reason that we got a \$10,000 grant from the Frost Foundation in New Mexico a couple of months ago. I had no idea how to do that earlier. I had absolutely no idea, but I'm learning one day at a time. [chuckles]

Kyle: Your funding is a combination of city funding, grant funding, and church funding, is that--

Christie: Yes, the diocese is helping, but it is getting more and more expensive as more and more people show up. Right now it's about a \$5,000 a month program for food and utilities and on and on and on, insurance, that kind of thing. I do have a handful of churches here in Bastrop who have recently said they're going to give us a monthly check and that'll help too. That's also part of my work.

Kyle: Help us envision the space. What is Bastrop like? What is your shelter space like? Help us picture it.

Christie: On the big picture, Bastrop is a town of about 9,000 people right now, majority African-American. It is in the middle of cornfields, and cotton fields, and soybean fields. It's about a half hour from a larger city, Monroe, but still far enough so that our homeless friends here aren't going down there. As you might imagine, the overnight shelter in Bastrop is filled to the gills, so we're working here.

I am so blessed by both the African-American community and the Hispanic community here. In a place like this, an old white lady who dances on the patio with her Black and Hispanic friends is seen as a total weirdo, but we have a good time and a number of my friends have said, "Pastor Christie, you're not supposed to dance, you're a pastor," and I said, "Did Jesus never dance? I don't remember reading about that." [laughs] We have a good time.

Kyle: I don't want to live in a theological world where we think that Jesus didn't dance.

Christie: He drank wine, for crying out loud. [laughs]

Kyle: We've got a bit of a picture of this powerful ministry that you're involved with. I'd like to invite you to step back and reflect a bit. You can go in whatever direction you'd like to, but how would you say that your experience at CDSP helped prepare you for the kinds of leadership that you are engaged in at the Lighthouse?

Christie: In many ways. The professors were wonderful and supportive. I was a little anxious about starting seminary because I'm no intellectual genius at all. That's not my gift, but CDSP helped me to clarify my gifts and also valued them. The professors there, Mark Richardson-- I'm not a brainiac, but that's okay. We're not all brainiacs. Some of us

are, and Lord knows we need them, but it helped me to see my own value in a way that I hadn't before. I was grateful for that. CDSP was beyond supportive and helped me to appreciate that even though I'm not an intellectually-oriented person, I still have gifts that I can offer to community. That was a blessing, absolutely.

Kyle: How did that work? Are there moments that you remember of where you were starting to connect those dots? I don't know if it's assignments or other kinds of experiences, but what was it like to come to that kind of a realization?

Christie: It really came through conversations with professors, but also I would write, I had plenty of papers to write. In the beginning, I would write them and I would think, "Christie, this is not smart enough." Yet I passed the class [chuckles] and I learned that there are many ways to approach our understanding of the mystery of love itself, of God. Fortunately at CDSP, I wasn't judged for not quoting scripture off the top of my head, I was much more about our relationship with God, and that turned out to be okay, which I had no idea.

Kyle: We talk a lot around the seminary about- we're engaged at the same time in the process of education and a process of formation. Those are intertwined, and it sounds like for you, I think I'm hearing you say that the education part prompted some real formational kinds of discoveries.

Christie: It really did, yes. I'm not somebody who has valued herself very well for a long time, but CDSP really helped me to see that, you can be a priest. Your call will be maybe a little different than others, but you can be a priest. Also to be around people who have very different gifts, they taught me stuff too. [laughs]

Kyle: Let's look at the flip side a little bit. If you were giving advice perhaps to the bishop or diocese, perhaps to CDSP, knowing what you know now about your journey and ministry, what kinds of experiences do you wish you could have had in the course of your formation, and how might we help to facilitate that kind of learning?

Christie: I can't think of anything, actually, that CDSP didn't offer. I was able to go to the jungles of Panama one summer and also to the border of Mexico and the United States one summer. That was, oh, talk about learning about different realities that way. As I said, the professors were very supportive, with wonderful senses of humor too. [chuckles] I can't think of anything that CDSP could offer on top of what they already have. Also, being able to take classes from other seminaries in the area, other denominations, and having a Muslim preach at one of our chapel services, that kind of thing. Opening us to different ways of understanding universal love, I just thought was so valuable. I have a funny story to tell. Can I tell it?

Kyle: Yes, absolutely.

Christie: A couple of years ago, before the COVID virus hit, I was down in Monroe with a member of our congregation who's an ob-gyn, and a young Black woman came up as

our waitress. We hit it off, we were talking and laughing and joking, and all of a sudden, she shut down. I said to her, "What's wrong?" She said, "Nothing." I said, "No, no, no. Something happened." She said, "I just learned that you think I'm going to hell." I said, "I do?" She says, "Yes, I just heard that you're a pastor and I'm Muslim, so you think I'm going to hell." I said, "Oh, you recognize Jesus as one of your major prophets, and he helped all of us to understand that there is one God." She burst into tears, threw her arms around me, and she said, "You know that?" My friend just cracked up laughing.

That's the kind of thing that I learned from CDSP and I just loved that. Is Jesus not the son of God? Of course, Jesus is a son of God, and Jesus gave us the material example to follow, but CDSP also confirmed what I had already been feeling in my heart about Jesus and about the world in general, and I'm so grateful. Now here in rural Louisiana, not so much, but anyway. [laughs]

Kyle: Not so much in terms of an encounter with a different pastor might have gone differently for your friend?

Christie: Right. Exactly. We have a Muslim homeless friend who's at the shelter now. He says the Prayers of the People. At first, he was like, "Oh no, I'm not going to come to the service." Blah, blah, blah. I showed him the Prayers of the People. I said, "What do you think about this?" He said, "Well, that's what we would pray." I said, "Well then can you do them for me?" and he does.

Kyle: Tell me about the liturgical-- It sounds like there's the liturgical life at the shelter. Tell us more about that.

Christie: We have a weekly chapel service, we have a chapel. [chuckles] We have so much fun. I had to get used to people saying, "Yeah!" while I'm preaching and that kind of thing. We have two women who, while I'm setting the table for Eucharist, who sing songs, which is just so wonderful. Then during the announcement time, I literally sit down and we have about a 10 minute talk about whatever's on their mind or whatever I happen to preach on or whatever. I did not anticipate that chapel service at the shelter would be such a blessing, but it blesses all of us. It really does.

Kyle: There's lots of ways that I can imagine that being true. Tell me more about your surprise and what that blessing has been like?

Christie: Well, so many of my homeless friends have not heard that they are loved. They have not heard that they have something to offer. To share Jesus's message of love for God and one another, and to help them understand that they have something to offer and that we are all together in this world, regardless of whether we drive a Rolls Royce or a grocery cart. I didn't know it would have such an effect, but it does.

It has deepened my relationship with my homeless friends, because I'm not making it up when I'm with them. We're having a good time together. We're joking around. They're asking me, "How could I help?" That's the thing that has really changed. "How can I

help? What can I do?" That kind of thing. It's been wonderful. I didn't know. I had to go, I had to do it, and then I learned.

Kyle: Wow. Wow. Does "How can I help?" does that extend beyond the temporal bounds of the service? I mean, is that an attitude that is shaping the community?

Christie: Absolutely. In terms of support for one another and for the shelter. I thought, for instance, that I was going to have to pay a cleaning company to come in and clean it. I don't. I have friends who are scrubbing toilets and sweeping out the patio and mopping the floor, all of that stuff. They're part of the process. As the shelter continues to develop, we're going to have social workers come in and help them move forward in their own lives. Right now we're still working to get the entire shelter settled and then we will move from there. The idea of helping one another and self-worth is just- I'm so grateful to God for that. I am.

Kyle: I feel like in the life of Christian leadership there are those moments that remind us what all of this is for. That put us in touch with these foundational truths of the gospel and of our faith, like inherent dignity of all persons and the power of community and support. It's really beautiful to hear, I think, the ways that this community and in particular, maybe worshiping in this community has put you and others in touch with that. I can see it in your face. Just a powerful, powerful part of why we're all here.

Christie: Amen. Amen. Yes. Yes. Yes. It's interesting to preach. I do. I do. I'm a supply priest for a congregation in a little town about half an hour from here, Rayville. They are a wonderful congregation, but they have a different orientation toward their relationship with God. I preach the same sermon and the different reactions are fascinating. [chuckles].

Kyle: Say more about different relationship with God.

Christie: Well, some people think that they know God through and through and other people don't. Some people think that God punishes us and gives us what we deserve, and other people think that stuff that happens in earthly ways, life gives us heck. God is with us. God helps us get through it. The look on faces, it's interesting. It's just interesting.

Kyle: One last question for you, based on your many experiences at the Lighthouse, what would you want the wider Christian community or the wider Episcopal church community to know about what you're learning about faith and life at the Lighthouse? What's your proclamation for the rest of us?

Christie: Oh dear. [laughs]

Christie: Well, that you don't have to be a brainiac. That Jesus's call to love God and one another is manifested in countless ways. That it's an ongoing process. Have I learned a lot? You bet. Am I continuing to learn? You bet. I'm really not fearful anymore.

I've learned to step out across that. I've developed a different understanding of carrying my cross and the blessing of that. At the same time knowing that there are hard things in our lives, but that we are never, ever alone. Those are some of the things that I have learned and I think can be so helpful to so many.

When I retire, the bishop has said it's going to be very hard to find somebody to do this work in the middle of flipping nowhere, but also because of the kind of work that it is. Fortunately, I'm building relationships with a number of different churches here. There's only one Episcopal church in Bastrop. People are coming by, bringing food or donations and beginning to build their own relationships with the homeless community. My prayer is that because of that, because of their willingness to step out in faith and across fear, when I retire, we're going to keep going.

Kyle: Well that is a beautiful vision to end on, and a wonderful opportunity to say thank you for being with us. For those who are listening, you can learn more about the Lighthouse on the Episcopal church of Western Louisiana's website, at epiwla.org, epiwla.org. You can read more in the fall 2021 issue of our *Crossings* magazine, at cdsp.edu/crossings. Christie, thank you so much for joining us today on *Crossings Conversations* and opening up your ministry leadership experiences with us in this space.

Christie: Thank you, Kyle. Thank you so much. Good medicine. Good medicine. [chuckles] Take care.

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