



**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 at Church Divinity School of the Pacific. I am here with CDSP's interim president and Dean, beginning in early June, Bishop Kirk Smith. Bishop Smith, thank you so much for being with us.

**Bishop Smith:** Thank you, Kyle. It's great to be here and it's exciting to have the opportunity to talk to the larger CDSP community.

**Kyle:** I'm sure they're really excited to hear from you. Let's go ahead and start with the basics. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

**Bishop Smith:** Okay. Well, I am the retired Bishop of Arizona, the fifth Bishop. I've been retired for three years. Originally I've lived in all parts of the United States except the Midwest. Both coasts, but not the Midwest. I was born in the State of Washington. My dad was a Presbyterian clergyman, and later went to work for the Presbyterian administrative machinery both there and then back east, at the headquarters in New York City. Grew up a little bit in the State of Washington, and then moved to New Jersey where I went to elementary school.

Then he took a job at the church in Arizona serving the Southwest, and so we moved to Phoenix and went to high school in Phoenix. I went to college at Lewis & Clark college in Portland, Oregon. When I went, I thought I wanted to do pre-med, but then I realized I couldn't do organic chemistry, so I had to switch. I always liked history, but I got interested in history, particularly in medieval history and decided that I would like to do that as a career. I went to graduate school at Cornell University in Ithaca, in medieval history, thinking that when I got done I was going to end up wearing a tweed jacket with leather patches and smoking a pipe somewhere in some nice little New England college, teaching medieval history but God had different plans in mind, I guess.

My area of interest was-- you really can't do medieval history and avoid the church, and so a lot of church history, and the more I got into it, the more I had the feeling that God wanted me on the front lines so to speak. Not just learning about the church, but actually being in the church, and so I had an increased sense of call or curiosity about what that might look like. I had the good fortune to spend a year in Oxford researching my dissertation. While I was there I decided that I would live at one of the seminaries, St. Stephen's House in Oxford, and that was a wonderful experience to be in the Church of England.

I wanted to go back to do seminary training there, but my Bishop who was in Arizona, who lived in Arizona then, he said, "I don't think that's a very good idea." He said, "You'd come back from England with an English accent wearing a watch fob, and you wouldn't [laughter] [inaudible] anybody, so why don't you come back here and go to seminary." I did, and I went to Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. Then got out and served a parish in West Hartford, Connecticut. Then I was rector at a little parish down on the Connecticut shoreline in Old Line, Connecticut.

Then I went from there, a total change from this little New England town in New England, to downtown Los Angeles where I was the rector of St James Wilshire Boulevard, which was a big urban multicultural parish. We had 40 different nationalities represented there. We say it looked like the United Nations at prayer, and we also ran a day school, a nursery school, a retirement center. It was really quite a corporate size place, but it was very urban and very diverse. Had a wonderful time there.

After 15 years or so, I decided it was time to do something else. I wanted to be a seminary dean way back then, and started the process on some of those places that were looking for new seminary deans. That didn't work out and somebody said, "Why don't you run for Bishop?" I said, "Oh I don't think I'd be very good Bishop. I don't know." They said, "Oh, try it out." I ended up as a candidate in Los Angeles and as a candidate in Oregon, and those were not particularly rewarding experiences. It was the hardest thing I ever did to be in those walkabouts and when those didn't pan out, and somebody said, "Well, Arizona is open. Didn't you come from Arizona?"

I said, "Yes," and they said, "Well, you ought to put your name in," and I said, "I don't know. I don't think being a bishop is for me." But I did and the experience in Arizona was completely different than the other two walkabouts and I just felt so good. It just felt right. That's where I ended up and I had a wonderful 15 years in Arizona. When I was thinking about retirement, I thought, "Well, maybe I can go back and do some of these things in terms of teaching that I always wanted to do." I've always loved teaching. Research, not so much, but teaching.

When I was Bishop, one of the things I enjoyed doing was having forums about different topics as I would go and make Sunday visitations. I thought, "Well, I'll talk to some of the seminary deans." I talked to the dean at General Seminary and he said, "Well, yes why don't you come and you could teach for a semester and that would be great." I did that, and then I ended up after that--it was supposed to just be Berkeley Divinity School at

Yale, but it turned out to be Yale Divinity School because they needed a medievalist for that year until their new person came.

Now I'm here at Virginia Seminary, also teaching a class sort of related, it's on the medieval mystics, which seems to be very popular, a lot of interest in that these days. Now CDSP coming up. So I've taught at these three different seminaries in the last couple of years. I call it the trifecta, where I stayed for a semester and this time my wife, Laura, got to come. She couldn't come the first time because she had broken her foot and then the second time I had to do it remotely because of COVID.

It's been great fun and getting to know a little bit about the different seminaries. Each one is different, each one is wonderful in its own way so it's been a good experience. I think I've learned a lot of things that I can bring with me now when I come to CDSP as the Interim Dean.

**Kyle:** I think you've hinted at this a little and touched on it some, but I wonder if you might elaborate on some of the ways that your academic interests and your parish and diocesan leadership, what ways have you found that they've complemented each other over the years?

**Bishop Smith:** I just like to do both things. As a parish priest, I was a parish priest for 40 years, and I like the pastoral aspect of that too, and I enjoy the excitement of teaching, and I found out that most of our folks, at least in the parishes that I served, although they were hungry to learn things, they really didn't know very much about their faith. They didn't know very much about the church really, and so it was exciting to have that time with them and to teach them.

I think one of the things I probably enjoy doing, and I think I'm reasonably good at, is making difficult things accessible. Making concepts that might be strange or difficult to understand, bringing those down to earth and trying to apply those to where people are in their everyday lives. To me, that's really the goal of teaching and that's what energizes me.

**Kyle:** I think good seminary teaching helps students start to think about how to do that in a, as you say, in a parish setting and how to make some of these complex theological discussions accessible for a wide audience.

**Bishop Smith:** For example, I was just thinking when I was a parish priest, every other week in church, we would have a little thing called time for tradition. It was, oh, a couple of minutes at announcement time, where I would talk about some aspect of what we did in the church in our liturgical life, or in our involvement in the community, or just try to tie what we were doing in to the tradition and to the history of the church so that people would feel part of that. I probably should add that for me, I grew up in a Presbyterian household, both my parents went to seminary. We talked about religious stuff all the time and my brother is a Presbyterian clergyman.

You can imagine what Sunday dinner conversations were like at our house. Sometimes the arguments got pretty heated, but one of the things that brought me into the

Episcopal Church was the sense of historic connectedness with the church. When I was in college, I went through a year or so, I call it my agnostic period, which I guess a lot of college students do, where I didn't really have much use for "the faith" as it were. I thought it was silly and only ignorant people would be Christians or something, some arrogant thing like that.

It was learning about history that brought me back to my roots as a Christian. I felt those roots particularly strongly in an Episcopal church that was nearby that actually one of my classmates had invited me to come with her to church for Easter vigil. I had never really seen anything like this, with this wonderful liturgy and art and this beautiful music and had incense. It was a revelation for me. It made me feel like, hey, first of all, Christianity is a viable intellectual alternative, and that there's this whole universe of worship that involves one's senses, the whole person, the holistic approach to worship that I had never really experienced as a Presbyterian. I was sold from then on.

At first, I didn't think about ordination at all. I just decided I wanted to be an Episcopalian. As time went on, I got more and more interested. As I mentioned before, had that increased feeling that God was calling me to be in the church, and then eventually to be in some leadership position in the church, rather than just studying about the church from a distance.

**Kyle:** Let's shift gears a little bit and I guess continue narrowing in on this new role that you're going to have with the seminary. I thought we'd start by just your take on what do you think are some of the important challenges facing churches right now in a way that is relevant for how we do things in seminaries?

**Bishop Smith:** I think that discussion's very much on everyone's mind, particularly now, as we try to retool after COVID. I think you would've gotten a different answer maybe to that question before COVID, rather than after. I think still, the main challenge we're going to face is as a church, making the main thing the main thing. In other words, to really understand that the church is by definition missionary and how do we bring the good news to the people of the 21st century that are around us? It's very easy for us in the church to get sidetracked with the institutional concerns. A friend of mine calls it majoring in minors.

We do a lot of majoring in minors. Just look at the typical parish budget, for example, or where people spend their most time, it's mostly internal consumption. It's keeping the building going, it's paying the rector salary, it's doing all these things to preserve just the institution. Whereas, as the old saying goes, the church is the only institution that's called to benefit those who aren't here yet. That idea of mission is something that we need to be rediscovering, and to do that in a way that is going to meet the needs of folks today. Stephanie Spellers, the Canon to the presiding Bishop, was here last night at Virginia talking to us, and she has this new book out. I love the title of the book, it's called *The Church Cracked Open*. I think that's a great metaphor for what we need to do.

Unfortunately, to make an omelet, you have to crack eggs. Sometimes reimagining the church in different ways means changing, it means letting some things go or actually to die, which is very hard. It means letting things go that we don't want to let go. We're very attached to them, but if we're going to be effective, we have to let them go. This making the main thing, being a witness to Jesus Christ in the 21st century is our main challenge.

I think particularly shaped by history both in COVID and also our own American history in the last few years. One of the things that we're going to have to come to grips with is a better sense of diversity than we'd really done in the institutional church. You can think of all of the things that have brought that to the fore in terms of our own racial struggles where we thought we were making progress and really aren't making that much progress.

We really have to come to grips with the racism that still exists not only in our society, but in our church. That's going to be a big challenge for us, and the other is going to be the challenge of using technology. I just think of what I do technologically compared to what I did two years ago, forced to do that by COVID. This gives us all kinds of wonderful opportunities. A friend of mine says it has kicked us 10 years into the future technologically, I think COVID did.

I think that's exciting as somebody who enjoys the area of communication. I'm excited about what we can do differently in terms of communication. I'm not sure anybody completely knows what that's going to look like yet. This is very much a work in progress. I understand that although some churches have used technology in extremely creative ways in the last couple of years, a lot of churches, especially some smaller churches are really struggling in this post-COVID time.

The good news for us, I think at CDSP is, here we're on the doorstep of the technological capital of the world in Silicon Valley. I would hope in the future that CDSP, for example, would become the leader of how you use technology in an effective way in the church because there's so many great possibilities here for building community and doing mission and getting the word out. A friend of mine, he's a cathedral dean, and one time during COVID, he discovered that he had on his sermon, when he was preaching normally in the church he'd have a couple or 300 people. He didn't have any during COVID, but what he did have to his dismay is he found that around the world, he had 50,000 people listening to his sermon.

**Kyle:** Wow.

**Bishop Smith:** Which is just mind-boggling. They're all kinds of wonderful things we can do with technology. I'd like to see CDSP at the forefront of that as time goes on, because the resources are there. Of course, Trinity too. Trinity churches has for many years been a leader in using technology.

**Kyle:** Yes. This, this very show is a CDSP, Trinity coproduction. I think one of the things you'll find is I think some creativity about thinking about that stuff is tied in some ways to

the fact that we have this really rich and sophisticated low-residence program. Where we've thought a lot about some of those questions. I feel like when the technology stuff impacts your classroom experience, it plants the seeds for thinking about how it can impact your ministry experience as well.

**Bishop Smith:** I've always believed that technology is morally neutral. You have to find out ways of using it to the good. It has bad aspects too, to be sure, but it also has wonderful, good aspects. We have to explore those more.

**Kyle:** Yes. What attracted you to the opportunity? I think you hinted at some of this earlier, but tell us more about why you were excited to join us at CDSP.

**Bishop Smith:** It was an interesting story. It happened real quite quickly. I saw a press release that said that CDSP's Dean, Mark Richardson, was retiring and that they were looking for an interim and eventually a new Dean. I said something to my wife as we were taking a walk in the morning and I said, "It'd be interesting to do that." She said, "Well, why don't you talk to Phil Jackson, Reverend Phil Jackson, who used to work in Arizona." I knew Phil from his time working in Arizona and always liked him. We got along great. I said, "At least I should talk to him on the phone." I called him and he said, "It's funny, we were just talking about you. Would you like to talk to some other people here at Trinity about this?" I said, "Yes, sure."

A couple days later we had a conversation with a few other people. They were telling me about this opportunity and I said, "Are you guys interviewing me for this job?" Because you're just talking to me like I'm supposed to start doing these things." They said, "Oh no, we decided you're it." [laughs] I said, "Okay." The more I learned, the more I realized what a terrific kairos moment, or moment of opportunity this is for both institutions.

Here is a seminary with a long distinguished history and tradition of fine education, of educating people for the church. Because of all kinds of things has to rethink that now, and here comes Trinity with their unbelievable history and their unbelievable resources, looking for partnership to move into the future. You couldn't make this stuff up. [laughs] This is an incredible moment of opportunity. I know it's a cliché, moment of opportunity, but it really is. To have these two very strong institutions in their own right, coming together with an openness to the future, with an openness for some kind of new vision for the church. How could I resist? [chuckles] It's too good to be true. The more I talked with them, the more excited I got about them. I'm very happy to be going and very excited about the possibilities.

Now that's probably going to lead you to another question, Kyle, and that is, "What do you hope to accomplish?" Well, I'm only going to be there like a year. I'm just the interim after all. You're going to say, "What do you want to do in a year?" I think one of- I don't want to have anybody to have unrealistic expectations, including myself, of what's possible do in a year, but I think one of the things that I can bring to the the table is helping them to be true to their core values, to dream big, to think about what is it that we both bring to the table and how could we go forward to together?

I'm very impressed with a book that I read recently by a woman named Susan Beaumont who wrote this book called *How to Lead When You're Not Sure Where You're Going*. It's all about leadership in an institution that's in transformation. Here's an institution, CDSP, which is in transformation. It's going to be different and I think better even than it's been in the future, but nobody knows exactly what that's going to look like. You have to move into that future with a certain amount of courage and faith to be sure. One of the things that she says in the book, which I think is so important, is that you live in that liminal time by rediscovering what your core identity is.

One of the ways you do that is that you look at the things that you've done well in the past and you think about how does that apply to the future. As we move into the future, what are those strengths that we can build on? Also realizing that leadership during a transitional time, like we're in. It's not just CDSP by the way, it's the whole church. We're in a transitional time. When we're in that transitional time, it's extremely anxiety-producing. People look very anxious when it's not really clear where you're going. One of the things that maybe I can hopefully bring to the table is what they used to call, I guess a non-anxious presence.

A sense of we're all in this together, we've all got something to contribute to this, and we can do this. I think that might be the biggest gift that I can bring to them.

**Kyle:** Have you spent much time in the Bay Area?

**Bishop Smith:** Not very much. No. Just the occasional tourist visits. We're looking forward to spending some more time there.

**Kyle:** We like to end these conversations with some kind of word of encouragement to the folks who are joining us. I wonder if you have a message for the CDSP community, or for the church writ large, that's on your heart today.

**Bishop Smith:** I think my message to both, there are a couple of images that come to mind. One is, I love the story about the feeding of the 5,000. In that story we're reminded again, that when we bring even the little gifts that we might have, that God can turn those into something unbelievably fabulous. I believe that God has already given us everything we need to do the work of the Church. We have it all, especially in the case of these two institutions, we have an unbelievable amount of resources on both sides.

We have everything that we need to do our work. The other image that I like is this fishing image too, about Jesus always calling us out into deeper waters. To not be afraid to move out beyond the comfortable shoreline and to move into new and exciting ways. When we do that, we'll find Jesus there just like the disciples did on the Sea of Galilee. That's my message. Jesus Christ, the same today, yesterday and tomorrow. That we're always being called to new things and we're always being given enough to do that work.

**Kyle:** Well, it's two beautiful images, they're helping me feel less anxious. I'm sure that the community will appreciate your words. I know that they're excited to meet you.

Thank you so much for joining us for the show. We're looking forward as we're recording this, we're looking forward to seeing you on campus in just a few months.

**Bishop Smith:** Great. Thank you Kyle, hope to see you soon.

**Kyle:** Thanks very much.

**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)