

Episode 1: What Drew You to the Church

Transcription

Caption: On June 10, 2025, five Lutheran Clergy met on Zoom. To discuss the church's relationship with young adults. Their conversation was edited into four parts. Here is the first part.

Title: What Drew you to the Church as a Young Adult

1) Church was a Place to Belong.

Anne: I grew up at camp. I was a camp kid. So, I was a camp counsellor starting at 16 and campus ministry was a part of my world. Then I ended up at university, went to bible college. So all those – it felt like the through line, that wherever I was at there was a place for me, that I belonged in some sort of faith community. And, uh, fit, where it wasn't always easy to fit in other places.

Sarah: But, because I had grown up in the church, I didn't know anything different. So I quit it for a while when I went off to university 'cause I wanted to make sure it wasn't just a bad habit, and I did miss it. There was something about the church that had been - and you know – instilled enough in me that I missed. And I went to campus ministry a little bit, but again like Michelle, that wasn't what I needed. And also there was a place too where it was a place where I could be me. And having grown up in the church and been instilled with very solid Lutheran theology from a young age I knew they had to take me. You know, I didn't have any sense that I, I wasn't good enough or I should have to dress a certain way or like I had - you know - I had - you know - Martin Luther's quote "Sin boldly but believe in Christ more boldly still" on my dorm room in high school, so I was prepared to walk in with my tattoos and my piercings and my smelling of cigarette smoke and last night's beer and be like "I'm here for church. How can I help?" And, I found a place that wanted me like that, and that when I came and said I want to be part of this community, I have something to contribute, These are the things I like to do--that was accepted and appreciated.

Lyndon: I really didn't grow up in the church, and so was mid-way through undergrad that I started hanging out at a Lutheran church in Saskatoon while at University of Saskatchewan.

Didn't really get into campus ministry there but uh for me it was a bridge between some philosophy classes and theology classes I was taking and the Lutheran church that I started attending. So, it was kinda interesting. You meet your typical folks in philosophy and theology classes and some of them are Christian and having some of those conversations, one ending up being – my Roman Catholic friend who ended up being my baptismal sponsor at the Lutheran church. So, you never know what avenue things will go, whereas a lot of classmates I had, you know, who had grown up in fundamentalist churches had said “oh I can finally leave the church.” Or take a break or whatever. And so they thought it was absurd that I was doing the opposite of that. They were like “why are you doing that?” I'm like “I don't know. Seems to make sense.”

Pause for reflection and discussion

2) The Church gave me opportunities

Michelle: And I was like, I was in North Minneapolis in a congregation that was, you know, predominantly typical Lutheran, lots of grey hair. Not a lot of, you know, not a lot of action around child soldier justice let's say. But I went to the pastor and I said, “There's this documentary that I really want to create an event around” and he could have very easily could have said, “that's not within our jurisdiction” or “take it to the council” or “here's the process that you have to do in order to get an event passed.” But he just said “Absolutely, how can I help?” And so, and then like helped me kinda figure out how to do a screening of this documentary and facilitate a conversation around it. And that was a huge sign of affirmation for me. And then, also the women of, I was in the ELCA, the Women of the ELCA had this [opportunity] where they were looking for young women in each synod who [could] sort of become speakers around human trafficking and so they put a lot of energy and resources to send me to to an ecumenical young adult forum in Washington D.C. to learn about Human trafficking. And then Chapters in Minnesota like invited me to their little old ladies women's tea to learn – to hear about what I had learned at this ecumenical forum. And so just those kinds of opportunities where not only did I go to the church and saying “I care about this stuff, is this going to be a church that will listen to me.” But also, the church coming to me and saying we see that you can be a speaker for us or learn about this on our behalf and then we will listen to you.

Anne: I think it's those opportunities that I, uh, appreciate too Michelle. We – along the way there were things that were really cool that were opportunities as a young adult. I got to travel a lot, so I was on a youth encounter team in the US with a ministry there for a couple years. And then ended up with the, through the ELCA, through the Lutherans in the States, volunteering for a year in the UK. As a parish volunteer and worked with the Church of England. And, uh, it was there that the Priests that were so high Anglican Priests. Like bells and smells, all of the liturgy. And uh, so completely foreign world from my own church experience, but they were so gracious to welcome me and have a space for me to be a part of their community and note gifts that I had, but also let me explore and ask lots of questions and learn a ton.

Pause for Discussion and Reflection

3) Individuals and Mentors came Alongside me

Anne: But, it was really, it started – uh I got to say props to the Deacons – because it was a Deaconess, Sister Anne Keffer who when I was young said, “I think this ministry thing is really interesting to me, I think I want to do it.” I just admired her wisdom and the way she came at things. And she was the one who was like “Okay.” And she was the first one that said “okay.” Not, “what are you thinking, run away.” She just said “okay.” And then, off we went, on more conversations. So it was that – those affirming conversations and opportunities that I never would have dreamed of on my own.

Lyndon: When I think about mentors I had along the way, I think of Pastor Michael Pallends in Saskatoon. Sarah's parents played a role as my home congregations pastors in Swift Current Saskatchewan. And then pastor Sarah Dyck, and Matthew Anderson in Montreal where I studied at, ended up going to seminary, at an Anglican seminary there. But before that I was at a Lutheran church town in Montreal and I knew a Bishop Bruce Myers who uh said “Well just come to Seminary with me for a bit.” And I'm like “Who does that? That's weird.” But I did, and ended up going to that seminary, so that's where you invite people and who knows what will happen.

Pause for Discussion and Reflection

4) Church allowed Exploration of Values and Beliefs

Michelle: I think for me that sense of home was definitely evolving and emerging through my relationship with the church as a young adult. I grew up in a not Lutheran context, in a much more theologically conservative context and as a young adult, that - the structure that I had put God in started to crumble and I didn't really have the tools to replace it with anything or to broaden the - right to release God from that structure and so I was struggling with trying to find a church that would both receive me in the midst of that deconstruction but also provide me with a reason to stay. And so really the church gave me a place to say for the first time "grief is okay, complicated feelings are okay. You don't have to believe everything that everyone around you believes. It's okay to be here exactly as you are, as messed up as you feel on any particular day."

Lyndon: I had that kinda hunger there is for conversations and questions around faith. So grateful for people, in my case it was Michael Pallends, whose still in Saskatoon as a pastor there, and still teaching I think. And having those kinds of conversations with students that can ignite faith and passion for church at a young age.

Pause for Discussion and Reflection

5) Church Fostered Advocacy and Justice

Sarah: I remember having conversations with someone who actually ended up becoming, you know, one of my children's God parents, saying like "How can you be a person who goes to church when you care so much about justice in the real world?" Like that didn't make any sense to them having grown up in the bible belt in the Fraser Valley in B.C. like they had never encountered a Christianity that wasn't at odds with a passion for justice and a love for everyone's individual uniqueness and queerness and funness and aliveness and so to talk to my friends and say, "you know actually my faith informs this for me." Was a, you know, I went back and forth between lots of different worlds.

Gretchen: Like when people find out that I'm a "Clergy Person." Yeah it leads to a very different kind of interaction and then where their like "Oh you're different than I thought you'd be, look as a Clergy person. You're okay." Right, and often like I feel like that's the

best compliment from a non-Christian person that I interact with like “oh, you're okay, oh look at what you're advocating for,” right like that to me is highest form of compliment.

Pause for Discussion and Reflection

6) Church was a Multi-Generational Community

Michelle: And I tried to find a like “Young Adult Church” to join because that seemed to be the thing to do. And I would sorta visit young adult small groups and young adult worship services and I just kept coming back to multi-generational worship communities because I realised that for me, I really wanted to be in community with people of different ages. I actually didn't want to be just with a group of young adults. So I kinda walked back and forth between young adult spaces and places where I was one of the few young adults.

Sarah: But I, I had plenty of young adults in my life. I had friends. I had a social group that I was quite content with. And none of them went to church. It wasn't something that that they were missing from their lives, but it was missing from mine and I found that, for me going to a congregation that had multi-generational worship was something that was a place that I fit, and in that time when I was, you know, young and in my twenties and in Vancouver where most people had, you know, come from away. And weren't with their families anymore just being in our little young communities of figuring out who we were as students and drop outs and people working at coffee shops. I was probably the only one in my group of friends who on a regular basis spent time with anyone, you know, plus or minus five years my own age. I was the only person in my friend group who went to funerals of people who weren't family. And there was something of value in that, of being part – of being connected to, you know, a broader scope of humanity, gathered around faith.

Pause for Discussion and Reflection