

Dan DeLeon

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SPEAKERS

Mary Wilson, Dan DeLeon

- M** Mary Wilson 00:05
Hi, I'm Mary Wilson. I'm interviewing Dan DeLeon, a longtime friend and colleague. It's October 1st, 2020. We're here to talk about Dan as a minister, the pandemic, and stories that he would be interested in sharing. So let me start, Dan, by simply asking you what kind of events and times in your life have shaped you to become the minister that you are now?
- D** Dan DeLeon 00:41
Wow, that's a tough one right off the bat. I was raised fourth generation in a Baptist Church in Austin, First Baptist Church downtown congregation. Very active at least in terms of the youth group, social justice ministries, with organizations right there, helping with an emphasis on helping our homeless neighbors. That kind of fed into my understanding of what church is. Contradictory to the stereotype of us Baptists in the south, I don't recall ever hearing any message from the pulpit condemning things like homosexuality, or even smoking and drinking and dancing and those kinds of things, none of that. The message was much more about loving your neighbor, doing what's good and just, however, it was not specific. So that was open to interpretation is what I'm trying to say.



Mary Wilson 01:53

Yeah.



Dan DeLeon 01:54

That's where I think that's kind of what formed me, seeped in a little bit more. Seminary, of course, was the most profound experience that I've had in a classroom. Learning tons from my peers of different denominations, nationalities, even with 10% of the student body being a being foreign students, 51% of the student body being women, and it being largely intergenerational. I served, continued to serve, Baptist congregations, was a youth minister for a substantial time at a mission Church of the church that I grew up in. There, was confronted with much more of the specifics. One of those being around missions and how you do mission trips, that was a big piece of their outreach there. When I would come home with the young people to share good news about what we had encountered, how we had been transformed, the work that we had done, occasionally that was met with, "How many people that you save?" Those kinds of things just didn't compute with me. I don't understand that. I've never been taught that. And frankly, I just didn't have the capacity to appreciate it. I mean, I just never understood that being the message of the gospel, so that kind of rubbed me wrong. Then, of course, there was the issue of you, my friend, Mary, coming forward. I want to be eventually licensed for ministry and then ordained for ministry. And your sexual orientation becoming a quote, "issue," for that split the congregation in half. I saw the worst of a community of faith in how that was addressed. With these public town hall meetings and vetting you publicly in ways that I was never vetted even privately.



Mary Wilson 02:51

You think that might have been a little double standard?



Dan DeLeon 04:16

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. It was raised, I remember that specifically, that there was a guy in the congregation who asked that question, publicly - "we didn't ask Dan these questions, why are we asking her these questions, to make it obvious?" All of that happening in front of not only your daughter's, Mary, but the whole youth group, and me seeing how that negatively affected them. I just went, "this is wrong, this is contradictory to the gospel." It's not only that I have come to, it was at a position then of recognizing that not ordaining someone based on their sexual orientation was antithetical the gospel. But now, also since then, reaching the point of a theology that says to me that

homosexuality is not a sin, and one's sexual orientation is not sinful. All that being said, that speaks to your question of what formed me. That's part of it that informs my calling to be serving the church that I presently serve. And celebrated a month ago today, 15 years of serving this congregation, Friends Congregational Church in College Station, Texas. They are an open and affirming congregation, which is the UCC's designation for congregations that are affirming of people regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, and race, nationality, ability, et cetera. I looked at that congregation and said, "here's a congregation who has already dealt with these things that this Baptist Church, that I was serving, is just not able to deal with, let alone helpfully." My question in hindsight was, "what would it be like to serve a congregation that has reached the promised land? Where do you go from there?" Because as the story of God and God's people reveals, that wasn't the finish line. We continue to do good and challenging work, I continue to be stretched and pushed in that respect and formed. As Maya Angelou says, "I am not a Christian, I am becoming a Christian." I am not formed in terms of being a minister, I'm continuing to be so. The answer to your question is more, this is the trajectory and the formation, not the who I am.



Mary Wilson 07:05

Yeah, being a minister is a ongoing learning experience.



Dan DeLeon 07:11

Yes.



Mary Wilson 07:13

I want to back up to a little bit to your family growing up in Austin, and that downtown church, and what were some of the family experiences you had that helped shape you?



Dan DeLeon 07:32

Family experiences as in my family?



Mary Wilson 07:35

Yeah.

D

Dan DeLeon 07:40

Well, I'd say a great deal of that has to do with the fact that my father is Mexican American and married a White woman who was Baptist and he was Catholic. His first wife had died from stomach cancer. My mother's first husband, she and he had divorced. And so, dad basically said, "I think I'm going to have a much easier time being a White passing Mexican dude over at your Baptist Church than you being a divorced White woman trying to be at my Catholic Church." That's why my family became a part largely of the Church of my upbringing. I struggled a great deal with the fact that I was raised to identify as Mexican American, but I don't look it. I have been in environments that are largely White and mostly affluent, in terms of where I have lived and been educated. The church that I was a part of, though, was not entirely a departure from that. But a refreshing departure from that, in that people were coming in from all different parts of the city and surrounding areas, different school districts, different socio-economic backgrounds, and people who were housing insecure. I was able to get more of an understanding of the diversity of the mosaic of God's people.

M

Mary Wilson 09:19

Well right. One of the reasons for asking the questions, the question about family, it seems like that understanding started there, and then the church your family chose to be a part of expanded it. Would that be fair to say?

D

Dan DeLeon 09:35

Oh, yeah. Fair to say.

M

Mary Wilson 09:37

Yeah. How has that played out now in your ministry in College Station? You mentioned that it's a welcoming and affirming church, and you talked about that. Can you talk more about just, in addition to that designation, I guess how that mosaic plays out?

D

Dan DeLeon 10:03

Starting with the personal piece of it, because of the fact that that was my identity and where I was placed and everything, I never had a firm sense of belonging. It was very much like Kurt Cobain and Nirvana, who was like, I don't want to be some heteronormative jock dude. I don't understand people who relate that way

and talk to me that way. I just didn't know where I fit. I was told who I was, but it didn't match my circumstances. When I became the pastor of Friends Congregational Church, and I was told by a good handful of people in the congregation, that they identify off the record as the "island of misfit toys." I said, "well, these are my people." I've got to figure out what that means because they don't look like me, largely. There are families that do not look like mine - foster families, single parent families, mixed race families, same gender couple parent families, all that, and then mine. Anyway, I basically decided and continue to decide to learn as much as I possibly can about other people's experiences - who they are and where they come from, to inform the theology of who we understand ourselves to be as a people. I feel that, at the risk of sounding egotistical, that I am uniquely made and positioned to be able to lead in that capacity.

Mary Wilson 11:59

M

Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing that. I see a guitar in the background, and I happen to know you're a musician. How does how does music play a role in your life, in your life in your ministry?

Dan DeLeon 12:18

D

Well, when I was younger, it was just about getting attention [laugh]. That's it. I mean, I learned how to play bass, electric bass, when I was 15 years old because everybody was learning how to play guitar. I was like, "they're gonna need a bassist." That's why I learned how to do it, so I could be in bands. I got in bands. I was in bands for years and years and years. It was initially an attention getting mechanism, it evolved into more of an outlet of creative expression. I haven't been in a band in 10 years now, but I continue to write music when I can. Most recently, I wrote a song that dealt with racial injustice and the idea of wanting to rush to reconciliation when our siblings of color are going, "what do you want to reconcile?" I wrote a song dealing with that, I digress. I also like playing music with my daughter. She likes to sing and so, we play music together, and especially in this pandemic, that's been a good bonding experience for the two of us.

Mary Wilson 13:30

M

Well, and she's fabulous. I mean, I've had the chance to watch some of the videos you've posted.

D

Dan DeLeon 13:36

Yeah. She's great. I love her, so there's that. I also say that it's different when you try to pull that into worship. Because yes, I sang for 13 years in the choir growing up. Yes, I have sung in church choirs since then in my adult life, but that's apples to oranges from playing rock music on stage, that kind of thing. When you've got to pull that into the worship sphere, it's not a performative medium. I get 10 times more nervous playing music in church than I ever did on the stage in front of people. That's a peculiar thing that I've learned about. And in the process that has taught me that the wall between the spiritual and the secular, when it comes to music, doesn't need to exist. You can pull in secular music into the church environment and have it be just as impactful, if not more so, in different ways than singing "how great thou art" out of the hymnal.

M

Mary Wilson 14:42

Yeah, great. Well, tell me what friends is doing during the pandemic? Kind of walk me through how things started out for you, I guess back in March, and where you are today, and the impact you have I've seen in your congregation.

D

Dan DeLeon 15:03

Okay, walk you through from the beginning. March 15th was the last Sunday that we met in person. The CDC said that Sunday afternoon, that was a Sunday, that you need to avoid crowds of 50 or more people and cancel those kinds of events. They would soon say they're after crowds of 10 or more people, all that kind of stuff. It was even a big thing that weekend, where I was just like constantly on the phone with people who are saying, "Should we or should we not open at all on Sunday the 15th?" We went ahead and opened, taking every step we could ensure people's safety, but this is before we even knew about how terribly contagious it was. Aerosols and respiratory droplets being the main method of it being spread all these kinds of things, so people were apprehensive. Attendance was down that day. The choir still sang and not to get political, but how can one not these days?

M

Mary Wilson 16:14

Right.

D

Dan DeLeon 16:14

It appalls me that we knew about this from the top down weeks before that weekend. And

in retrospect, given the fact that one of my church members, mother, local, was the third person to die in our community from COVID-19 and she, the church member, had made the difficult position to put her mother into a particular retirement home, which is how she caught COVID-19 and died. If she had known then before about that, it would just be different, everything. That's it, that's a grievance, that's a lament, is a better way to put it. That was last time we met was March 15. We, at that time said, "we're not going to meet for at least two weeks, stay tuned." Funny, two weeks of distancing, this would be fine, you know? We rapidly discovered more of the details. We, sparing you all the details, we made the decision pretty early on that we are not going to meet in the sanctuary until there is a vaccine that is accessible. That let us off the hook from doing this, week to week, "what are we going to do? Can we come in like a limited capacity? Are we going to do sign-ups for people to come?" And just all these kinds of things. In talking with my peers, I recognize that many of our churches are doing that in kind of limited capacity. No more than X amount of people, sign up if you want to attend the worship service, all these kinds of things. I'm like, that's noble, but given the mission of our church of this radical inclusivity, we can't do that.

M

Mary Wilson 18:11

Right. I don't want to put words in your mouth, is it because that means somebody gets left out? Because it's really not open to everyone?

D

Dan DeLeon 18:24

That's exactly what it means.

M

Mary Wilson 18:25

Okay. Yeah.

D

Dan DeLeon 18:27

It's also just negligence, of course. I mean, you don't want to put people at risk. We immediately started doubling down, for lack of a better phrase, on our online presence. We had already been doing Facebook live, but all that was was just a camera on what's happening in the room. When there's nothing happening in the room, you have to change your game. Now, we have really been polishing, week by week, learning more and more about making our online presence more accessible, more engaging, more digestible, that all that kind of stuff. We never learned any of this kind of stuff in seminary.

My associate pastor, Reverend Trent Williams, and I, and our director of music ministries, Chris Hoffman, and a volunteer AV guy from the congregation, have been learning tons about recording equipment, editing software, accessibilities, what does and does not look good, sound good, length of time of people's attention span, all this kind of stuff. We've been doing that. I've been preaching from a teleprompter for crying out loud - never would have done that. Yes. We've been doing that. Well, just like I thought, in this college town, when the weather starts to shift here in Texas, people physiologically start to just shove logic aside and really yearn for community. Even though my people, thankfully, have not given me one ounce of push back, except for maybe one church member.

Mary Wilson 20:21

M

There's always one.

Dan DeLeon 20:22

D

There's always one. I mean, other people have had a good handful. It's been like a good handful of their church members have said, "We really need to get back in there." I haven't had that. I have had my church members grieve what we can't have, but that grieving is out of a recognition that it is unsafe to do that. They would not been afforded the space and time in which to grieve appropriately had a decision not been made that said definitively, "we will not meet in this space until there is a vaccine successful." That's been a healthy thing. Still, there is that yearning for community and we have outdoor space. We have made the decision that we can meet outdoors now that the weather's getting better. Coincidentally, Mary, this coming Sunday, for World communion Sunday, thanks Presbyterians, is going to be our first in person meeting since COVID hit. It's going to be outdoors. We're taking painstaking measures to ensure people's safety as much as possible. We're setting up cones that distance people 10 feet apart from each other. To say, individuals or households that are shared by the same people, you can post up here, next cone, so on and so forth, and stay in that area. Everybody has to wear masks, no singing, all that kind of stuff.

Mary Wilson 22:01

M

What about like sound equipment and that sort of thing? Did you have new equipment, did you?

Dan DeLeon 22:06

D

No, thankfully, we have a PA system that was left over from the sanctuary before we had a building expansion seven years ago. It was for the smaller sanctuary. We're just pulling that PA system out. I'm meeting a guy tomorrow morning at 9 am, who has found us since the pandemic, online, but lives right down the street. He's never even been inside the building. He's gonna meet me at the building tomorrow, for he and I to look at the equipment that we've got. For him and his used to work at Best Buy capabilities to see how can we use this to stream it live? Because not only do we have to make it so that people can hear it, who are physically present, but we also have to maintain our online community and stream it live, and people hear the same thing. You know?

Mary Wilson 23:01

M

Yeah. right. How are you doing in the midst of this?

Dan DeLeon 23:10

D

I'm doing better than most. I mean, they had that article that I'm sure you saw that went around the Baptist minister in, I think, Oklahoma - who shared it about basically, we clergy folk having suicidal ideations, and the mental health struggles that we're having. I've had a couple of church members share that with me and say, "Are you okay?" That kind of thing.

Mary Wilson 23:40

M

That's good.

Dan DeLeon 23:42

D

Yeah, it is good. It's nice to have people looking out for you. I haven't had suicidal ideations, I've had bad days. I miss not having a weekend at all. I mean, from pastoral ministry that you already sacrifice a good chunk of your weekend anyway. But now, it's like, it's totally freakin gone, totally gone. There's hardly a light at the end of the tunnel for every week where you can say, "I'll get to that point and get my replenishment, and keep going." Oh, Stacy and I are going on our first date tomorrow night that we've had since COVID - six and a half months without a date. We're going to go tomorrow night finally. That's because we just finally said, "Fuck it." That's what you have to do to maintain mental health, is you have to just intentionally say, "Fuck it," and carve out space to do something that's going to take care of you. As you can tell with me just kind of

getting worked up, I get frustrated. My down days are more because of my feelings for other people than for myself. I get stressed out, I exercise, spend some time with my family, I pray and breathe, and whatever. I get down when I think of people who do not have either the resources or just like the peace of mind and strength of will to do that for themselves.

M

Mary Wilson 25:37

Yeah.

D

Dan DeLeon 25:38

When you hear about a news story that came out this week talking about how 60% of families in America have either lost their job or their income has gone down since the pandemic, I'm like, "Man, that's some systemic depression." Mental decline kind of stuff that we have yet to see how that's gonna play out for the likes of us care giving people. That's the kind of stuff that overwhelms me. At the same time, it just also strengthens me with that whole, esters such a time as this, kind of thinking - "If I don't do it, who's going to do it?"

M

Mary Wilson 26:30

When you were talking about no weekend at all and how that's changed and so on, the image that came into my head was a hamster wheel. Do you feel like you're just on this wheel that won't stop?

D

Dan DeLeon 26:45

Yeah. It's felt that way from the get go. I had a good conversation, a while back. Example, our associate pastor, who's very introverted, has largely been in charge of the editing by his own choice. That's been like his focus. Early on in the game I said, "I need you to focus on this and I'm going to focus on that, and we're just going to deal with this week to week." Well, he went away for a week of vacation, once back. When he did, he basically didn't leave the keys to the car, that kind of thing - just didn't let us know how to do this stuff. He was just going on the assumption that we knew how to figure this stuff out. We didn't. I got 10 times more angry at him than I would have if we weren't under these pandemic circumstances. When he came back, I had to have this conversation with him where I'm like, deep breaths. When you left think about the fact that, you know what I'm saying?

- M** Mary Wilson 27:56
Because in the past, he could have left for a week and everybody knew how to make things work.
- D** Dan DeLeon 28:02
Right. Communications easier because you see each other in passing and you go, "hey by the way." And just those kinds of things, those are not.
- M** Mary Wilson 28:11
Yeah, are you missing, let me just follow up with that, are you missing those in passing kind of conversations? Is it like losing connections in ways?
- D** Dan DeLeon 28:23
Yes. Very much so.
- M** Mary Wilson 28:24
What is it like to try to have community when you can't be together?
- D** Dan DeLeon 28:34
What do you mean by community when you can't be together?
- M** Mary Wilson 28:36
A community as a congregation, when you can't physically be in the same space. I mean, as I understand, the Zoom, the Facebook Live Stream and you have phone calls and that sort of thing. Talking about that in passing conversation just makes me think about how much information is shared in those type of things and how relationships are built in those kind of moments that are seemingly innocuous that I'm aware of. That you get people who will talk for maybe a minute or two, "Hey, how's your daughter? How's your spouse? How's, you know? Hey, oh, I haven't seen you, have you been sick?" You're not having those kind of conversations that are the in passing ones. It seems like those kind of conversations help build community because it's ways you keep tabs on each other. I'm just wondering, are you feeling the absence of that? How is that impacting your congregation, you think?

D Dan DeLeon 29:41
We're definitely feeling the absence of that because, saying again, that we have this mission of being extravagantly inclusive. With that comes a very hospitable space where we really love each other deeply. The passing the peace lasts for an obnoxiously long amount of time.

M Mary Wilson 29:58
Yeah, yeah, I understand that.

D Dan DeLeon 30:01
Kind of thing where the introverts are like, "oh gosh."

M Mary Wilson 30:05
Why are these people talking to me [laughs]?

D Dan DeLeon 30:09
So, yes, I miss it. My people miss it, having those check-ins is detrimental to our health. That is why right when we said we're no longer going to be able to meet in this place, stay tuned, we immediately put into place ways to check on our people. We initially did what in hindsight is just like too much, but we did it for a long time - that is Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, we had zoom noon check-ins and prayers. Wednesday evenings every week, we additionally had a zoom prayer and communion time, we did the service online and that kind of thing.

M Mary Wilson 30:55
Go ahead because I think we're going to the same place. Have you experienced fatigue of that, Zoom fatigue?

D Dan DeLeon 31:03
Yeah. Then our associate pastor and I were like, "This isn't sustainable for you and me." We widdled that down to Monday and Friday. I take Monday, he takes Friday of noon check-in times and Wednesday evening, he and I trade off leading a communion and prayer service for the church. Just like I knew what would happen, the core group

of people continue to stay with those options. Then we just get people drifting in and out of them because who wants another zoom meeting, you know?

M

Mary Wilson 31:40

Exactly. I mean, I'm not even doing that. I had opportunities to attend conferences and various other things. I just assume to see people in person, and I'll wait till I can do that.

D

Dan DeLeon 31:59

Yeah. I mean, that's one thing that we did. The other things we did, aside from what I've already mentioned about the Sunday online services, is our spiritual life committee put together these boxes called a spiritual life kit. We put a little book of common prayers in it that we made, a little battery controlled candle, little communion kits, those things I never thought that I would use. Rip off the top and there's a little wafer and then you rip off the second layer and there's juice. And this thing called the epistle, which is a new magazine that we put together, that we're doing quarterly. That is not like a monthly newsletter, we abandoned that. It's a quarterly kind of report of here's what we've been doing.

M

Mary Wilson 32:53

Oh, okay.

D

Dan DeLeon 32:55

Great. You know, really exciting.

M

Mary Wilson 32:59

Yeah, I'm really curious about that. What else do you put in that? Besides what you've been doing? Are there writings that you include or?

D

Dan DeLeon 33:13

Yeah, we include pictures of stuff that we've been doing, but we also, yeah, include writings and interviews and stuff like that. We had one person interview a handful of children and youth in our congregation about how they're dealing with the pandemic. That helps maintain not only a sense of community, but theologically speaking

from the mouths of babes perspective, about what we need to be prioritizing, thinking about, praying about. That kind of stuff is in the epistle and that's in the survival kit. We spent this past week delivering those by hand to every member of the congregation. The ones that we couldn't get to, we mailed them to them, so everybody has these. On Sunday, we're going to use the communion kits that they have as part of oral communion Sunday. We're doing stuff like that to stay together. In the process of delivering all those things, and reaching out to people to update their contact information so we can get it to them, that does the maintaining of community and checking in with people just to see how they're doing. We've heard those stories a million times about during a normal year, when the only time a church member who's on the fringes hears from their church is in a stewardship drive. Well, this is a healthy way of being proactive, where we're like, "Hey, we're all on the fringes right now in this pandemic, and we're still checking in on each other. How are you doing?" It's been really good.

Mary Wilson 34:50

M Yeah, well, good. Good. How are you sleeping?

Dan DeLeon 34:56

D Good and bad. If I get exhausted, I sleep well, but usually I have a tough time falling asleep and then I'll wake up at least twice in the night and can't get back to bed and that kind of thing.

Mary Wilson 35:13

M Yeah. Is that just a disruption to schedule or is it because you have a lot on your mind or you're concerned or?

Dan DeLeon 35:21

D A lot on my mind and I'm concerned.

Mary Wilson 35:23

M Yeah. Would you say that it's different than prior to the pandemic?

D Dan DeLeon 35:29
Yes. On a consistent basis, yes.

M Mary Wilson 35:32
Yeah. I feel for you, brother. Like I said, I think before I started recording, I'm fairly happy not to be in a position of making decisions like this. I think it sounds fairly overwhelming. Yeah, I feel for you, but I love your spirit. I love the way you're caring for your community and for yourself. When we talk a lot about self care, but boy, nobody's had to experience it quite like this before. I was thinking about this a little bit earlier and some of the things you were talking about - are the things you did for self care in the past, are they working for you now? Or have you had to develop new tools?

D Dan DeLeon 36:34
They're largely working for me as they did before, but I've had to develop new tools as well. The things that have been working for me consistently are exercising, spending time with family, reading, and stuff like that. What I've had to develop new tools for is making up for the fact that I can't be with friends. I've had zoom meetings with friends, phone calls with friends, but that just doesn't do the same thing. Some of the friends that I have, our communion has to do with particular events that we look forward to and those are all gone. We're having to kind of develop new excuses, if you will, to be with those friends.

M Mary Wilson 37:27
Yeah. I mean, there are friends that I get together with because we'll go out for lunch. Now, we're not doing that. I haven't seen some people since March or before.

D Dan DeLeon 37:40
So yeah, there's that.

M Mary Wilson 37:46
What gives you hope? What gives you hope in the midst of this?

D Dan DeLeon 37:56

That my congregation is still there and engaged and not giving up. Really living out this notion of what we said before the pandemic, that the church is not the building, it's the people. That gives me hope. Then my kids, who are 15 and 12, are healthy and happy and doing well in school still. Lamenting that they can't be with their friends the way that they used to, but not dwelling on it, just sticking with it. My family as a whole doing well and not caving in, all of that. In all honesty, just a deeper appreciation for this faith that we practice that is about amazing graces to the grace have brought me safe thus far. Grace will lead me home. It's about who got you this far, how did you get here? You certainly didn't do that on your own. If you've been brought to this point, how can you say that you're not going to get out of it? It's going to be okay. This sucks real bad, but we're gonna be better when we come out on the other end of this thing. That gives me hope.

Mary Wilson 39:38



Dan, thank you so much for taking time to talk with me today. I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording and then we'll wrap up.

Dan DeLeon 39:46



Sounds good.