

Bonnie How

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COVID-19, pastor, religious leader, Canada, U.S. citizenship, seminary, Native American studies, Rocky Mountains, Wesleyan tradition, immigration, First Nations Indian Reservation, pumpkin patch

SPEAKERS

Mary Wilson, Bonnie How

- M** Mary Wilson 00:01
Hi, I'm Mary Wilson. This is September 28th, 2020 and I am interviewing Bonnie How, a local minister. Bonnie, would you like to introduce yourself and your congregation a little bit before we proceed?
- B** Bonnie How 00:16
Hi, I'm Bonnie How. I am a transplanted Canadian, lived in Canada for most of my life and then came to the United States, to Texas specifically 14 years ago. I am the senior pastor, the solo pastor, of St. Luke United Methodist Church in historic Old West Austin, right on the edge of Clarksville. We characterize ourselves as United Methodist, but radically inclusive. We're open and affirming and really justice-minded. It's a good place to be. I've served here for the last year and it's been great. It's been a good thing.
- M** Mary Wilson 00:57
Has it just been a year?
- B** Bonnie How 00:58
Yeah, July of 2019.



Mary Wilson 01:01

Okay, for some reason, I was thinking it had been longer than that. Where were you before that?



Bonnie How 01:08

I served at Cedar Park, First United Methodist, and I was there for a long time as the associate and prior to being the associate, I was the youth director for 10 years.



Mary Wilson 01:21

We first met when you were at the church in Cedar Park and I was at a church in Cedar Park.



Bonnie How 01:28

Yeah.



Mary Wilson 01:29

Yes. Okay. My timeline was a little off, but be that as it may. I want to start by asking a kind of an obvious question, what brought you to the United States from Canada?



Bonnie How 01:44

My husband's work. He's in video game design and his company was working on a Star Wars game. They wanted to have easier access to Lucasarts (Lucasarts video game company) and all that sort of thing. So, they decided to open a studio in Austin. Their main headquarters are in [ringer], excuse me - in Edmonton, Alberta. Sorry, I thought I'd turn that ringer off. Their main headquarters are in Edmonton, Alberta. Edmonton and Austin are actually very similar cities culturally, rather than, comparing Houston to Calgary, they're all very business and oil and gas and money, money money. Whereas, Edmonton and Austin are the capitals of their state or province, they're arts and culture oriented. So, they kind of have that similar bent to them. Austin was a good place for the company to set up their U.S. branch. We got transferred down here and it was really hard for me, my undergrad is in Canadian Studies. My family came down here to buy a house. My dad called me on the Saturday when we were starting house hunting, crying and upset, and told me I was a traitor to my country and my family for considering moving to

the U.S. I became a citizen this May, solely so I could participate because I had been disenfranchised for all this time. It was a big. I cried and cried when I did my oath. Thankfully, I had my mask because it was a pandemic.

Mary Wilson 03:33

M

You became a citizen of the United States in the middle of a pandemic, with a background message that somehow you were betraying Canada by doing so? How are you then?

Bonnie How 03:48

B

The biggest reason I did that was so that I can vote and my mom just even sent me a text this weekend saying, "Did you vote?" Because she knows early voting is starting in places and her questions, she had two parts to her question, "Did you vote? When are you moving home?"

Mary Wilson 04:09

M

Where is home?

Bonnie How 04:12

B

In Alberta, in southern Alberta, in the Rocky Mountains. I grew up about 45 minutes from Glacier National Park.

Mary Wilson 04:19

M

Oh, wow.

Bonnie How 04:20

B

Yeah.

Mary Wilson 04:20

M

Okay.



Bonnie How 04:21

So, [a] really beautiful place.



Mary Wilson 04:23

I can't even imagine. That sounds lovely.



Bonnie How 04:26

It is lovely.



Mary Wilson 04:27

Do you think you will ever move back?



Bonnie How 04:32

No, I don't. Yeah, I don't think so. Um, because we have three grown children who've made their life here. One of them has become a citizen. One is actually doing his citizenship interview next week.



Mary Wilson 04:51

Okay.



Bonnie How 04:52

We have a daughter who is not ready to do that yet, just because the idea of a particular signature on being a documents yet.



Mary Wilson 05:02

Got it.



Bonnie How 05:02

We would rather wait, but they're here and they make their life here, one of our kids is in fifth grade and so, yeah.

M Mary Wilson 05:14
This is your home?

B Bonnie How 05:21
This is it.

M Mary Wilson 05:23
Were you a pastor before you came to Texas?

B Bonnie How 05:28
I did. I served a church in Edmonton called Mill Creek church of God. It was out of the denomination of the church of god of Anderson, Indiana. So, a Wesleyan bent, but really small denomination. I was the pastor to youth. There are three pastors. There's the senior pastor, and then the pastor to the German congregation, because it was a German background church, and they had a service still that was in German.

M Mary Wilson 05:58
Oh, wow.

B Bonnie How 05:59
He was the pastor to the German congregation and then me as the youth minister.

M Mary Wilson 06:07
Yeah.

B Bonnie How 06:08
When I was in seminary, I was in seminary in Canada. We transferred as I was in seminary, and so I had to do seminary here again. And find a church because that denomination didn't have a congregation here that I could find. They do now. But I had to find a denomination, and didn't really know much about the denominations here. Except for some that I walked into that didn't have women in leadership then.



Mary Wilson 06:43

Right. The Wesleyan tradition of the Methodist Church was a more natural fit than the others?



Bonnie How 06:52

It was a great fit for me. It connects to my theology in a really good way. The issue around LGBTQ issues and acceptance has been difficult for me.



Mary Wilson 07:12

What I know superficially about your congregation is it has been one of the more outspoken ones and supporting of people in, not just in the city, but I think in a Methodist world. So, how, I guess, how has that worked for you, feeling like you have this home theologically that feels good, and yet there's this other place of in the Methodist Church, pretty big conflict?



Bonnie How 07:47

Yeah. For me, there's been a lot of grace in being able to say, "If God calls me out of this place, then God calls me out of this place." There's that part of it. Then there's also this aspect of hope, that you stay in it, and stay advocating for this act of justice, which I think it is an act of justice to raise your voice and say, "No, people are beloved," and that this is not an issue of choice or whatever people say about it. It's not what we should be thinking about or the perspective that we need to be talking about queer issues in. So, trying to stay in that conversation has been important and exhausting, sometimes, but important. I know that my own social location in the issue is so privileged. We have somebody in our midst in our congregation, who is moving forward, is in seminary right now. Is moving forward in our candidacy process, which is our process to become a pastor who is openly, and openly in a relationship, is queer, and to walk with them as they are saying, "This is my calling. I have to move forward in this even knowing the potential for harm in that because we aren't there yet, and to counsel them and saying, "I see God's in calling you and for our congregation" to say, we see God's calling in you and we are going to do everything we can to affirm you in this calling, and to support you, and love you. I mean, that is a social occasion of privilege that we need to use to advance.



Mary Wilson 09:55

Well, let me back up a little bit to earlier in your life and maybe events along the way, what are some of the formative experiences you've had that I would say has led you to be the person you are today? What in particular led you into being a pastor? In other words, what's your story?

B

Bonnie How 10:20

My story is unique and interesting, I've been told. I did not grow up in a church, I'd never went to church as a kid. And there was a couple things that happened when I was in university. One was that I was in these Canadian literature classes. The conversations always came back to, "Well, this reminds me of so and so in the Bible or this is a retelling of the story of Ruth or whatnot." But I didn't have any of that language because I've never gone to church.

M

Mary Wilson 10:56

Right.

B

Bonnie How 10:56

I am an enneagram two with one wing, which means I'm a perfectionist. I'm a helper with perfectionist bent and the fact that I didn't have any of that language drove me nuts. So, I started asking people, "I need to figure this out, tell me about this." At the same time, another part of my undergrad had a lot to do with First Nation studies, at the time it was called Native American Studies. That's a large portion of what my undergrad consisted of. I was in classes with people from the Blackfoot, and Piikani, and blood tribes, which are the tribes around the area where I grew up. They had a worldview and a view of the creator that really impacted me. Those two things kind of collided. In the Wesleyan tradition, and this is why the Wesleyan tradition appeals to me so much, we have this notion of prevenient grace, which is the grace of God that goes before you. It says, "If we are created to be in relationship with God and God is constantly wooing you, before you know anything about God, or before you have any language for that." So, that was happening in my life. Then I had opportunities to say, "Tell me about your faith, tell me about your faith, tell me about your faith. Everybody just told me about how their church was the best and I shouldn't go down the street to that other church because it was terrible. And so I was really frustrated with that. Then I had an experience, one of these very mystical experiences, where God spoke to me and said that I was beloved and spoke words to me in a really weirdly audible way. That experience - my first reaction was not, I'm going crazy, but that was God."

M Mary Wilson 13:04
Yeah.

B Bonnie How 13:05
110% certain that that was the Holy Spirit. And that that was God. And I wouldn't have been able to say that was the Holy Spirit because I didn't know anything about that. But to be able to say that was God.

M Mary Wilson 13:17
Yeah.

B Bonnie How 13:17
And so recognizing that there is a reality of God in our myths and the presence of God shifted my quest to figure out now what? Like, I believe God exists. And that should impact every aspect of my life because that's how I saw Native American people living their faith. They have a faith in their creator that impacts how they live. And I felt like once you come to that reality, that God is, it should impact you completely. And it did, it shifted my whole way of being, which scared my husband, like, he was terrified.

M Mary Wilson 14:05
So, you were already married?

B Bonnie How 14:07
I was already married. I married my high school sweetheart and he was not on the same journey. He had no idea what was going on. He thought I was nuts, but I knew that this was God and I need to figure this out. So, I spent the next year and a half trying to figure out like, did this mean I need to go to church? What does this mean? I have no idea. And we moved from southern Alberta to Ottawa, so that my husband could go to school. And all those times that I was asking people in Alberta, tell me about your faith, tell me about their your faith, and they would tell me about their church. Not one person invited me.

M Mary Wilson 14:47

How interesting.

B

Bonnie How 14:49

Yeah. We moved to Ottawa and the Saturday we arrived, we're unpacking our uhaul, our next door neighbor walked over and introduced herself and said, I'm going to check out a new church tomorrow, do you want to come with me?

M

Mary Wilson 15:04

Wow.

B

Bonnie How 15:05

It was literally a five minute conversation of introduction and invitation. We went, and she never went back.

M

Mary Wilson 15:15

Interesting.

B

Bonnie How 15:15

I kept going because after the service was over, she made a beeline for that pastor. I don't know anything about this woman at all, but her best friend had just died of cancer at the age of 23. She was furious at God. She [was] just [like], "Why did this happen? Why couldn't I do anything to help her or save her?" And the pastor said, "Well, what did she do? Like, she's just telling you what to do. What did you do?" She said, "I stayed at her hospital room and we read stories to her, and we played games, and we cried, and we laughed." And he said, "That's what you're supposed to do. You're supposed to be present. Jesus calls us to be present in the world." For me, that was like, "Oh, that's what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm supposed to be present. Like God was present with me, now I'm supposed to be present in the world."

M

Mary Wilson 16:18

Yeah.

B

Bonnie How 16:18

As God is present with us. So, that was it. I was baptized a few months later. That was in the Presbyterian Church and my elder, there was an elder, who was kind of walking alongside me as I'm making this decision to be baptized. The night before my baptism she took me to dinner and she said, "Are you excited about heaven?" I said, "Heaven? I haven't even given a thought to heaven." [laughs] and she was appalled. I said, "Why would I want to be worried about heaven when right here in this moment I know God is with me."

M

Mary Wilson 16:59

Yeah.

B

Bonnie How 16:59

I know I am with God. For me, the relationship is present and real. The kingdom is here. I went home going, "Oh my gosh, they're not going to let me get baptized tomorrow, I failed the test." But they did, so.

M

Mary Wilson 17:14

Good.

B

Bonnie How 17:14

That was all. All that stuff, which is a long story, has shaped my leading and my calling because I don't think you come to this place, these four walls called church to find God.

M

Mary Wilson 17:32

Mm hmm.

B

Bonnie How 17:33

I think it happens out there in the world, through these people that are called Christians. And I, this sounds judgmental to me when I say it, but we're supposed to be present in the world, embodying Christ by the Holy Spirit, to be present in that same way. I think we fall short. I do, I fall short all the time, but that's the goal. That's sanctification. We're working towards being better at that, so, yeah. That's also why

I'm very ecumenical and interfaith because I think God is out in the world, revealing God's self to all people, in all contexts, in all curious ways. And so to be really attentive and open and curious about that, to just be willing to see God in the world is really important.

Mary Wilson 18:40

M

That's just beautiful, beautifully said. Thank you, Bonnie.

Bonnie How 18:44

B

You're welcome.

Mary Wilson 18:47

M

So, where is your husband on this journey with you now [laughs]?

Bonnie How 18:53

B

He was really terrified. Honestly, he had no idea what that meant. And then when I started going to church in Ottawa, our kids were one and three. Then I got pregnant with a third. But they were really little and that church was meeting at a school gym, or a rec center gymnasium. They sat in a semi-circle and kids just ran back and forth. He decided that he was going to come with me to help me wrangle the kids. Partly because he wanted to see what was happening and partly he wanted to help me out and be supportive. Two and a half years later, we moved back to Alberta from Ontario and then Quebec. We lived in Quebec for a little bit and then we moved back to Alberta. He decided that he wanted to go to this program called alpha. Are you familiar like alpha?

Mary Wilson 19:53

M

I've heard of it. I don't know the details of it, but I've heard of it.

Bonnie How 19:56

B

It's basically Christianity 101. It goes through all that and it's really low-key. As a facilitator for alpha, you're trained to say, "That's really interesting, what do you think?" Then you direct that thought to somebody else in the group. You never have the answers, you just are open to the questions and open to the leading of the Spirit. And in alpha, he had that

"aha moment." He gave his life to Christ, but he also is not as passionate about it. I don't think (inaudible audio). You know, I don't think it's as affective - with an "a" -affective. It hasn't changed him in the same way that it - I don't think he had a mystical, by definition, experience that kind of rocked his world the way I did. But yet, he is the first person to say to me, when I'm talking about things in the life of the church, "Well, where is Jesus in that?" And, "Where's the gospel in that?" And, "Where's the good news in that?" And, "How is that sharing Christ's love in the world?"

M Mary Wilson 21:16
Good questions, right?

B Bonnie How 21:17
Yeah, really good questions when we're thinking about doing this activity or that activity. So, he is a person of faith too, [he] just expresses it differently. He's a different person. So, it should be like that.

M Mary Wilson 21:32
Wow, I'm learning so much about you today. I'm very excited to be talking to you. I was wondering, then, since you said that you didn't grow up going to church and have a religious background, what do your parents think about your vocation?

M Mary Wilson 21:57
(laughs) Okay.

B Bonnie How 22:00
I'm gonna say, my family, my mom was 15 when she had me, my dad was 17. They were really young. We had a lot of support from our extended family. When I think about my parents, it's just not my actual parents, but my grandparents, and my aunt and uncles. We're a big group of people because my parents needed support. It was really tough at first. My uncle is gay. He had a really hard time with me becoming a Christian because he had this notion that the Church says that he's an abomination, and that I should not have

But he and I are only nine years apart and we lived together before I got married. I rented from him while I was in university. Then when we did get married, we rented space from him in his house, like we shared a house with him. He was really upset. Then it rippled throughout my family. He didn't talk to me for a few years, like, we didn't have a relationship, and that was hard. And as much as I tried to tell him, you know, that's not all Christians and that's not my belief, it was really hard. [This was] exacerbated by 9/11 because when 9/11 happened, my sister in law was living in Manhattan. When I watched the towers fall, I turned around to my husband and my kids and said, "We're not doing Halloween this year. There's too much evil in the world." Then my kids said, at a gathering that he was at, "We're not doing Halloween this year because mom says it's evil." Then he was like, "Well, if mom's gonna tell you you can't do Halloween because it's evil, what is mom telling you about me?"

M

Mary Wilson 24:07

Oh no.

B

Bonnie How 24:07

I was just heartbroken about 9/11 and just the devastation. So, that was really hard and we were concerned about our friend. We had friends in Montreal who are Muslim and were concerned about them. It was just was going crazy. The world was going crazy at that time and I just didn't want to participate in that. Halloween just didn't seem fun to me.

M

Mary Wilson 24:36

Right.

B

Bonnie How 24:36

My parents are not Christians. My mom watches my online worship services sometimes. And yeah, my dad's been to church a couple times when he's visited with me. He's proud of me when he sees me doing church, but it hasn't impacted them in a big way.

M

Mary Wilson 25:07

Do they find it just astonishing that this is the path your life has taken?

B Bonnie How 25:16
I think so. I think surprising, perhaps a little bit disappointing because I was on the Canadian constitutional lawyer track. That was where I was heading - law school. Then I didn't because I had kids and wanted to have kids and wanted to have a family, so. When I think back, I was the first person in my family to go to university, like in my whole family. So, they had high hopes for me.

M Mary Wilson 25:45
Yeah. Here you are in Austin, Texas.

B Bonnie How 25:49
Here I am, a traitor to my country and pastor and not a lawyer.

M Mary Wilson 25:58
Really, how do you do with that language of traitor? How do you care for yourself emotionally? With that resonating in your mind?

B Bonnie How 26:11
I don't think I have processed that.

M Mary Wilson 26:13
Okay. That's fair.

B Bonnie How 26:16
Yeah, because I actually believe it.

M Mary Wilson 26:22
Okay, sorry.



Bonnie How 26:24

Yeah. No, it's like, that is for me. A couple years ago, before I became a citizen, I went with some friends to New York City. I've been to New York City before, but I hadn't been to Ellis Island. There's this whole exhibit about what it means to be a citizen. There's the oath on the wall.



Mary Wilson 26:45

Yeah.



Bonnie How 26:45

It says in the oath that you renounce your country. That was just interesting. If there was a year to become a citizen, this was a good year. When I went to my citizenship oath - we were only like 10 people in this room that sat 150 people, and you weren't allowed to bring guests and you weren't allowed to sit. My husband and I were at the same ceremony, but I couldn't sit with him. We had to sit apart. We had our masks on, and then the person at the front, rather than saying, "Repeat after me," or anything like that, he said, "I am going to say the oath." Then you say "I do." That made it easier for me because I didn't say those words. I didn't say "I renounce my country." It was so crazy because literally our appointment was at 10 am and by 10:04, we were back at our vehicle.



Mary Wilson 27:56

Wow.



Bonnie How 27:57

We sat down, he told us what was going to happen, we stood up, he said the oath, we said, "I do," [and] he said, "Pick up your certificate on your way out," and we were out.



Mary Wilson 28:07

Wow.



Bonnie How 28:09

It was a little bit more palatable because I didn't speak those words.

M Mary Wilson 28:17
Sure.

B Bonnie How 28:19
At the same time I said, "I do. So, that was hard."

M Mary Wilson 28:26
Well, I'm wondering how this impacts your vocation as a pastor? Where do you think that helps or hurts you? Where are you surprised by that experience and influencing you as an minister?

B Bonnie How 28:47
It helps me in that I see the justice issues around immigration in a little bit different way. Because I know, as an immigrant, even an immigrant with the social location and privilege of being white and have having a college education, I know how hard it is to navigate this system. The system in the United States is not user friendly at all. Even from something as simple as trying to get our daughter to get her driver's license when she turned 16. It was a bureaucratic mess. It was just horrible. I could not imagine what that would have been like had we had to go through that system where English wasn't our first language. We did not know how to, we didn't have the education that would enable us to more easily read all the legalese. There's so much rules and regulations, and this and that. We even missed things. Yeah, we had gone through all the documentation with a fine tooth comb only to be told that she couldn't get her driver's license yet or her learner's permit because her passport was not going to be valid for more than 90 days. Her Canadian passport was expiring in like 72 days, and so they wouldn't let her move forward. But to get a new passport meant we had to send her original one back to Canada and apply and it was taking 12 weeks at that time because everybody needed it. It was that point where everybody was needing to get a passport, you know. So, having to navigate this bureaucratic machine, even with those advantages, and still having problems was, it's eye opening to me. So I feel like that has given me a bent more towards justice in those areas, the way it's negatively impacted me. And there's an author that I love, this piece he wrote, his name is Russell Scott Sanders. But he writes about what it means to be woven into a community. So that, you know, the rocks, and the politicians, and the wildflowers, you know the names of all of them. But because I have this deep longing for home, I haven't allowed myself to do that. And I think I kept my kids from being able to fully do that. Certainly my daughter has that longing for

home and home is not here. Home is there. And so, not being able to be at home, you know, is a negative impact.

M

Mary Wilson 31:51

Yeah. Wow. That sounds really challenging. I'm also thinking about the fact that you've been at St. Luke's for a year as a senior pastor. And halfway through that year, came the pandemic. How is that? Tell me how life is as a minister in the midst of a pandemic and what your church is doing and how you all are navigating this.

B

Bonnie How 32:32

My husband laughs at me because I am really struggling with it. Because I am a people person, I would much rather do this meeting in person. And I love sitting out in the, I live in the parsonage, so on the property, and we put in a patio out front, so I could sit and visit the neighbors and people. And to not be able to do that has been really hard. And to not be able to invite, you know, come to church on Sunday, to not be able to do that, it's been really hard. To say, "You should check us out on zoom or on Facebook" feels really lame to me. I mean, it just does. And to not have church members around has made it feel like the Bonnie show instead of church, instead of community. And we went great, with great guts trying to build community at the beginning. Where we have, you know, Tuesday Bible study and zoom fellowship hour, and we were doing online music on Mondays and online music on Wednesdays, and we were trying to do all these things. And everybody was just exhausted. We're trying to, people are working from home, and everything's online, and they're getting their kids on school online. And they're, you know, we're just, nobody wants to be online come Sunday morning. And so, that's been really, that's been a challenge. It's been really hard. And I totally also don't want to be online either. So I understand that. And at the same time, I feel God calling us to do all these amazing things in our community. But as we're developing those things, and working to build those relationships, we have, maybe it's God's way of saying you need to do this really slowly. And prayer prayerfully, which could be a really good thing, but I just wanted, let's get this going. So it's been a challenge to me to slow it down. Take time. And my self care suffered. Definitely.

M

Mary Wilson 34:59

As I recall seeing the exterior of your church during the Halloween season, haven't you done pumpkin sales in the past?

B

Bonnie How 35:08

Yeah.

M

Mary Wilson 35:09

Are you going to be able to do anything like that this year? And how is that going to? I mean, it seems like to me that could be one of those sacred cows, if you will. Purchases that they don't even realize is so important to them.

B

Bonnie How 35:22

Oh.

M

Mary Wilson 35:22

And then you do it. It's like, whoa. How's it working?

B

Bonnie How 35:28

There's been a lot of tears on my part for sure about the pumpkin patch, so much so that my old church is still doing a pumpkin patch because they're out in suburbia. And they're doing a pumpkin, and I'm going to go help them unload pumpkins on Saturday.

M

Mary Wilson 35:42

Okay.

B

Bonnie How 35:42

Because I just, I love the pumpkin patch. And last year, doing the pumpkin patch of my first year here. And it was eye opening to me, to have that experience. And I hope that I communicated that with my folks. That this ministry of the pumpkin patch, not only is it an act of outreach because we support First Nations Indian reservation, and First Nations reservation in New Mexico through that, that pumpkin patch, but getting to know our neighbors. And having so many neighbors say things to me, like, I'm so glad this church is here. It's such an important part of the community. But then to be baffled and not know why they think that because they don't come. They don't come to church. And they don't, you know, they've come and bought pumpkins, but I've never seen them since. So what is it about St. Luke? And how can we tap into that identity of being the church in the neighborhood? How do we, how do we tap into it so that it is true? Because they said that to me and I thought, I don't think that's true. I don't know how that's true, other than the

pumpkin patch. Because it's not like we're, you know, we have a Wesley nurse that's stationed here, but this community is not a community that serves a population that is homeless or immigrant or needing health care in that way. We don't have a food pantry. We support a food pantry at Trinity United Methodist, but we don't really, I don't know what we really do in this neighborhood that connects us, that roots us in this neighborhood other than we're a building that takes up space.

M

Mary Wilson 37:35

Well, I will say one thing. I have voted there in the past and I find that availability to the community to be a plus. And also, you know, as a now former pastor, I also heard people say, "oh, you know, this is my church." Really, you never come? When? When is this your church? And it baffles me. But I just finally learned to accept that there's something about the presence, going back to a word you used, something about the presence of the people, the church, the vocation, that is in some way meaningful and comforting to people who don't actually come through the doors.

B

Bonnie How 38:25

Yeah.

M

Mary Wilson 38:25

How that is we'd have to explore with those particular people, but I came to the conclusion that it is.

B

Bonnie How 38:31

I find it really interesting that because my own nature is to be out in the community, and when I became the pastor here, it wasn't that I just became the pastor of St. Luke, I became the pastor to this neighborhood.

M

Mary Wilson 38:45

Sure.

B

Bonnie How 38:45

I have had that experience with neighbors, especially in COVID. There's a

neighbor that has, a couple times, reached out and as we've encountered one another walking the dogs, have spent an hour talking. She's cried on my shoulder. I've prayed for her and her family with her. But she doesn't, she's not a member at St. Luke's and she doesn't come to St. Luke. But I would hope she might say, that's my pastor. And so trying to just, you know, embody that presence in this community and then trying to disciple my folks to do the same where they live. Because very few of our members actually live in the neighborhood.

M

Mary Wilson 39:37

Yeah. So they come in from other parts of the town?

B

Bonnie How 39:43

Cedar Park, Bastrop, Elgin, Georgetown, South South Austin, like way South Austin. They, a lot of them lived here and then were priced out.

M

Mary Wilson 39:56

Sure.

B

Bonnie How 39:57

They grew up in this neighborhood and then had to leave.

M

Mary Wilson 40:00

Yeah, yeah. I wanted to go back and touch on one other thing that you brought up a few times. And that's connections with First Nations and in particular, the Native American population in New Mexico, you said the pumpkin patch goes to. So you mentioned being a Canadian studies major and so on, and that you had a lot of influence in from First Nations individuals and coursework. How has that translated into living in Austin, Texas? In addition to apparently this, did you start the connection in New Mexico?

B

Bonnie How 40:44

No.

M Mary Wilson 40:45
No, okay.

B Bonnie How 40:46
That is, the pumpkin patch, the pumpkin patch people, that's how I described them, the pumpkin patch people. That has been a ministry that they've had for over 30 years.

M Mary Wilson 40:58
Oh, wow. And the proceeds have always gone to New Mexico?

B Bonnie How 41:02
Mhmm because the reservation grows those pumpkins. It's their primary source of income, and they only sell pumpkins. They only do pumpkins through churches. And it's a really interesting model because, you know, churches sign up to have a pumpkin patch. And we get our truckload of pumpkins, like literally a semi trailer full of pumpkins. And we don't pay anything for those pumpkins. They come to us for nothing. And every day, we record our sales and then we submit a portion. Depending on it, we might keep 30% of the sales of the pumpkins and everything else goes back to them, but that's their model. So we don't, it's just a really interesting, beautiful partnership that -

M Mary Wilson 41:53
Yeah, yeah.

B Bonnie How 41:54
They've developed with churches.

M Mary Wilson 41:56
Well, a different way of doing commerce, if you will.

B Bonnie How 42:00
And the church in Cedar Park has been doing that pumpkin patch for over 23 years.

M Mary Wilson 42:08
Okay.

B Bonnie How 42:09
So it's a big, it's a big, big thing.

M Mary Wilson 42:14
Yeah.

B Bonnie How 42:15
I would love to go and go to the pumpkin field. I'd love to go and see that.

M Mary Wilson 42:20
Yeah. Well, is that going to be possible sometime?

B Bonnie How 42:23
It could be. Yeah, I think it could be, I think they'd be open to that.

M Mary Wilson 42:29
Seems like that would be really fulfilling to see it in person?

B Bonnie How 42:33
Yeah, I think so.

M Mary Wilson 42:34
Road Trip!

B Bonnie How 42:35
I know, to New Mexico.

M Mary Wilson 42:39
[laughs] It's not that far.

B Bonnie How 42:40
It's not that far. no. And it's probably a little bit cooler where they're growing Pumpkins.

M Mary Wilson 42:46
Yeah, yeah.

B Bonnie How 42:47
Similar to Alberta weather, anyway.

M Mary Wilson 42:50
Yeah. Well, Bonnie, let me ask if there's anything else that you would like to share, during this time about your congregation, about the pandemic, about your own calling to being a minister that we haven't touched on? That you think is important to include in this interview?

B Bonnie How 43:10
The one thing that I'm thinking about in a time of pandemic, and in the time of being a pastor, and trying to do all this stuff that we are all trying to do is that the idea of slowing down and, you know, I've spoken a lot, I think, about being present as Christ is present in the world. Like being Christ's presence in the world. But I've really been reflecting on the fact that I need to reflect more. I need to spend more time noticing that Christ is present with me in this time.

B Bonnie How 43:55
How do I describe that? There's been a lot more need for self care, and need for reflection, and need for prayer. And that's made me realize it's not just a need in this time of pandemic, but always. And we tend to get busy. I tend to get busy with the rush, rush, rush, leading a church. And even in this time, I felt that sense of urgency. But God, I don't know that God operates on a sense of urgency. Here it is 2000 years later, and we're still waiting for the second coming of Christ, right? Like, we're still waiting, but I think God is

not urgent. I don't know that God is so urgent. God takes God's time. So I need to learn to take my time and spend time learning from God, you know. It's an interesting thing I've been thinking about, breathing.

M

Mary Wilson 45:00

Well, yeah, I think I'll be thinking about your comment about urgency. And we are constantly, it seems like with the social media that we have, and so on, and instantaneous news that, that everything is urgent. You know, like every day, there's something that you must do, something now, you must act now, you must, you know. The urgency and busyness that goes with it is so prevalent in our culture, that God's urgency might be helpful.

B

Bonnie How 45:38

And when we think about urgency in terms of God, and in terms of evangelism, I really, that struck me strangely. When I moved here was this whole, we have to evangelize that more evangelical bent. We have to get the message out, so that you can say that prayer, so that you can be safe now. And, you know, when Christ invited his disciples to come and follow me, he was inviting them to a journey with him.

M

Mary Wilson 46:12

Mm hmm.

B

Bonnie How 46:13

And for a long time, they didn't understand who he was and what he was doing and that he was the Messiah. And sometimes they hoped to maybe getting the answer right when they said, you're the Messiah. But I feel like that's a journey. That it took time, it was about building relationships. And, and, and I love that idea of, I approached youth ministry like that, where I was just inviting students, like, let's do this faith thing together and see where it leads us. And not that, you know, I needed to make sure that this student said that prayer so that I knew they were saved. I mean, God knows what God's doing in their life and how God is working on their heart. And I'm just supposed to be, like I said, present with them and illuminating a path, in a way. So yeah, there's an urgency in the United States and maybe that North American mindset.

M Mary Wilson 47:19
Yeah, yeah.

B Bonnie How 47:20
Have you seen that Cadillac commercial from 2014? There's a Cadillac commercial. And now, all you have to do is google '2014 Cadillac commercial' and you'll see it. And there's this man purposely striding at a brisk pace through his house. And he's talking about, you know, in America, we work a 60 hour work week, we do this, and we do that. And he's passing by his wife, and he's passing by his kids as they're playing. He doesn't really stop to do anything with them, so that they can, you know, have this beautiful house, and his beautiful wife, and these beautiful kids. This is why we work the way we work in America. And I remember seeing that commercial and just being appalled.

M Mary Wilson 48:04
Yeah.

B Bonnie How 48:07
Sit down and play with those kids on the floor. Like, take your time.

M Mary Wilson 48:12
Yeah, the position is the goal.

B Bonnie How 48:15
Yeah. And the speed, the pace that he was going through that house at, like, that's what's the matter with this country, that's what's wrong with us all.

M Mary Wilson 48:26
Do you think, and I don't want to keep you too much longer, but do you think then that part of the, I guess, dynamics in our country about getting quote unquote, back to normal, is this disease with being still?

B Bonnie How 48:45

Yeah, I really do.

M

Mary Wilson 48:47

Yeah, we have to go go go. We have to acquire, acquire, acquire. And so, therefore, we need all these places open, and you know.

B

Bonnie How 48:55

And if you don't have a place to go to and you just stay at home and read a book in your backyard, you feel unproductive. And that, I think that has affected our mental health, too, that we we feel like we're not being productive and we haven't figured out how to rest in that. I did an exercise with my youth kids in Cedar Park one time where I invited another person from the church to also, I practice the centering prayer practice, she practices centering prayer, and I invited her to do it with our youth kids, most of whom were middle schoolers at the time. That particular year, there were a lot of middle schoolers. And they were able to sit for 20 minutes in silence and we didn't tell them how long they were going to sit, but our goal was to do a 20 minute practice. And at the end, this sixth grade six year old or grade six students boy said, "that was amazing. I don't know if I've ever been with myself for 20 minutes."

M

Mary Wilson 50:02

That's great.

B

Bonnie How 50:03

And I think that's, oh my gosh, if we could just teach that and model that and practice that, we'd be so much better.

M

Mary Wilson 50:14

Yeah, yeah. So Bonnie, I'm gonna, um, I guess, close our interview just by offering a word of thanks. Thank you for sharing so much. For one, i've learned more about you and two, just love hearing your perspective on being a minister and pastoring the church in general and then during this time. I got to tell, well, I'll go ahead and stop the recording. And like I said, we'll get you a transcript of this so you can review it.