

# Neil Thomas

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Church, Community Organizing, Activism, Mormon, Faith, Bournemouth, Social justice, United Church of Christ, LGBTQ, Spirituality, Marginalized communities, Dallas, Texas

## SPEAKERS

Mary Wilson, Reverend Dr. Neil Thomas

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- M** Mary Wilson 00:02  
Hi, I'm Mary Wilson. This October 5th, 2020, speaking with Reverend Dr. Neil Thomas, Pastor Cathedral Hope in Dallas. I want to welcome Neil to our conversation. Thank you for joining me, Neil. I want to start by asking a little bit about your background and how you got to be where you are today and what those formative experiences have been in your life that have moved you down the path to lead you to where you are today.
- N** Neil Thomas 00:37  
Well, as you can tell, I'm not from Dallas, but I'm from Great Britain and was born in a place called Bournemouth, which is right down on the south coast of the UK. Whilst I say I'm born in Bournemouth, I was actually born in Poole and that's significant because our family is from Dorset and Bournemouth was in Hampshire. The idea of moving to Bournemouth was because it was not in Dorset, it was in New Hampshire.
- N** Neil Thomas 01:08  
The borders of the country were realigned - at one point they moved Bournemouth into Dorset. It became acceptable for me to move to Bournemouth, which was literally like three miles away. I tell people I'm from Bournemouth because that's usually where people know. They don't really know Poole, but they know Bournemouth.

N

Neil Thomas 01:32

I was one of seven kids, five brothers and one sister. I fall on the bottom of the run. Although, actually, I have an identical twin brother. He's actually 10 minutes younger than I am, but now I live on this side of the world. He reaches his birthday, five hours and 50 minutes before I do. I was telling him that I'm now the youngest of the crop because I live over here. We always play that game.

N

Neil Thomas 02:11

We were early converts. My mom and dad were basically Anglican, but then everybody in the UK is an Anglican. We were some of the early converts to Mormonism in the UK, and were raised predominantly in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. [I was] raised in the Mormon tradition, was baptized a Mormon. Technically, I'm still a Mormon because I've never been excommunicated and I've never resigned my membership. Technically, I'm still a member of the Mormon church. The Mormons remind me at that every now and then.

M

Mary Wilson 02:57

Yeah. How does that continuity, impact the way you think about your spiritual life and your spiritual journey?

N

Neil Thomas 03:13

Well, I always tell people that I'm grateful to the Mormon Church for helping me to understand what it means in [the] Christian community to take care of one another. The Mormons are very good at being able to offer pastoral care to its members. If you're not a Mormon, that's a completely different thing. As a child, our home caught on fire and within two, three weeks, the Mormons had come in and completely remodeled. I have those memories. We went out of the Mormon Church - pretty soon into my childhood, my mom and dad divorced.

N

Neil Thomas 04:01

That wasn't the reason why we left. The reason why we left was that my mom wanted to remarry and he was not a Mormon. They would not offer her a wedding in the temple. That was the thing that actually caused us to leave the Mormon Church in the end because we'd been pulled over the Mormon tradition for most of my life. I was about nine by the time this happened, and so we left, we all left the Mormon tradition.



Neil Thomas 04:37

But what that taught me about formative experiences - what that taught me was that the church could be wrong and that it was made up of human made laws, rather than any sense of what the Bible had to say about all sorts of things.



Neil Thomas 04:55

Which of course, held me in good stead when I came out and realize that it really was not about doctrine. It was not really about what the church said on particular topics. It was really about my relationship with God and who God made me and God's divine image. No matter what the church said, on a number of different issues, but certainly [what they said] around homosexuality was as wrong denying my mother marriage in the temple. Just because he's not technically a Mormon. Those are some of the formative things that helped me to be able to challenge doctrine, challenge church theology, and eventually, find the irrelevancy of much of what the church says, with really no biblical or experiential background support for it.



Mary Wilson 05:57

Well, I can only imagine that it was a painful time in your family's life as well, to leave this church that had been supportive and so, helpful in a crisis like the fire and how has that impacted your understanding of the church?



Neil Thomas 06:21

Yeah. What's interesting is apart from myself and my twin brother, we're the only two that [are] actually involved in any kind of church community. The rest of my family really don't have anything to do with the church at all, not because of that. I mean, I think just the whole sense of what it means to be involved in a church in the UK is very different than what it means to be involved in a church here in the US.



Mary Wilson 06:49

Yeah, could you explain that a little bit?

**N** Neil Thomas 06:54  
Some of the last census of the UK, approximately 9% of the population in the UK attend church - attend a religious congregation on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday, Jewish, Muslim or Christian.

**M** Mary Wilson 07:09  
9% for all faiths and traditions? Not just 9% Anglican, or Christian, but all faiths and traditions? Oh wow, that's more than I would have imagined, yeah.

**N** Neil Thomas 07:24  
Yeah, religion's pretty irrelevant. You go to the Church of England, if you're born into the Church of England, you're nominally there for hatch, match, and dispatch, so baptism, marriage and funeral. My mother was asking the other day, "are you back in worship yet?" And I said, "No, we're still not worshipping." So, they're allowed back in church now. I said, "How many people?" And she said, "15," which would probably for many churches be about the average attendance.

**N** Neil Thomas 07:54  
I said - well she knows, our attendance is much, much larger than that. The actual attendance that we would usually have over a weekend here at Cathedral. So, her mindset was very different, even though she knew that the congregation here was much larger. Here in the States, up until recently, where now church attendance is in decline. When I first got here, 20 years ago, I think the average American said it was about 70% of the population attended church or something.

**M** Mary Wilson 09:02  
Is that about 50 now?

**N** Neil Thomas 09:05  
Yeah, we're at about 51-52%.

**M** Mary Wilson 09:10  
Wow. I find that interesting, just a little bit, about the UK because, of course in the US, we

will see pictures of the royal families, for instance, going to Christmas service or some other event and it seems to be a big deal that they do that. Now, of course, they're the head of the church [Supreme Governor of the Church of England] - the Queen is the head of the church, in a sense. Is that performative? Or is there meaning behind that for people? Do they want the hatch-match-and-despatch, as you say, to be there. Is that foundational? Is that meaningful? Or is that again performative?

N

Neil Thomas 09:56

I think it's a bit of both. I think that even here in the US, we know that those big Sunday's, Christmas, Easter - we have our Easter Christmas Christians, who just come to worship on those days and I don't think there's anything different about that in the UK. But of course, being in the church with the Queen also has some class with it. We're very much a classist society. You have some class status attached to being able to be in the same space as members of the royal family, which would also be performative. I think that there is both of those going on at the same time. But yes, she is the head of the church in England.

M

Mary Wilson 10:46

What was it like for you to go from that to the United States and to be a pastor. You came here to pastor a church? Is that correct, in the MCC denomination (Metropolitan Community Church)? How was that shift in culture?

N

Neil Thomas 11:02

I was already pastoring in MCC in the UK. I was ordained when I was 23 and was pastoring during MCC Bournemouth on the south coast of the UK. It grew to be the largest MCC in Europe and it was the first MCC to own its own property. It still is the only MCC in the UK to own property. Much of that happened under my leadership. I was actually honored by the Queen for services to the Bournemouth community, not just around LGBT issues, but around homelessness, poverty and many other, and certainly the AIDS pandemic, which of course was in full flight when I was first ordained.

N

Neil Thomas 11:56

The congregation I pastored actually was larger on Sunday morning than most of the churches in our area. We would average about 120 on a Sunday morning, and the local parish church, just down the street averaged 20-25 people. So, we were a pretty big deal. Certainly in the denomination for the churches in Europe, we were certainly well

respected. I was invited to apply for the position of senior pastor at Founders MCC in Los Angeles [Founders Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles], which is the church that Troy founded and Troy was still a member of - so, when I when I was elected, that's where I moved to. I pastored Bournemouth block for 12 years and Los Angeles for 13 years and now here, Dallas for me, I'm in my sixth year.



Mary Wilson 13:10

What are some of the biggest differences going from LA to Dallas? Because those are cultural shifts as well.



Neil Thomas 13:19

Going from the UK to LA was a very interesting shift because I really thought that Los Angeles was atypical of the United States. I realized that's not true. LA is a fascinating place to be, it's a melting pot, religiously. It's interesting. It's West Coast, so it's progressive. I was always on the prevailing side of most political issues that were going, or social political issues. It was a great place to be. I was there during the Prop 8 (California Marriage Protection Act) times and all of that.



Neil Thomas 14:05

Negotiations with the Mormon church was fascinating because they knew I was a Mormon. I remember one conversation with the Mormon Bishops and the state leaders in Los Angeles, just after they passed, which was getting backlash. We met at a Jewish deli on Figueroa, and we sat across the table, and the Mormon Bishop leaned over at one point and said to me, "Why don't you just come home brother?" I looked back at him and I said, "Why would I want to go home to a place that don't want me?"



Neil Thomas 14:57

I think because of my Mormon roots, and because I'm still technically a Mormon, I was able to have conversations and be in spaces that were of privilege. I took that very seriously. Out of that came a documentary called "The Way of Way of Openness," and a lot of healing work was done between the gay community and the Mormon Church in those times. That was some of my fondest memories of the U.S.



Mary Wilson 15:34

That's an important conversation during Prop 8 because the Mormon church was so

engaged in that, not uniformly, from my memory of it. Actually, Betty and I got married in Alameda County during the period of which same gender marriage was legal. So, we had a stake in its outcome. We were very disappointed, angry. I can only imagine then the extension of that to the LGBTQIA community in all of California, in particular, and then the connections with the Mormon Church, that's fascinating to me. I hadn't realized that one, that was a big part of your background or two, that that's where you were at the time of Prop 8. Thanks for sharing that.

N

Neil Thomas 16:32

Okay, just one second because I want to show you something. This is the Mormon statue of Jesus, which is gone. When I left Los Angeles, the Mormon Church came to the closing service and presented this to me. On the bottom, there's a plaque it says, "in appreciation to your service for humanity, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." They presented this to me on my final service in Los Angeles, amazing healing between those pieces of my life.

M

Mary Wilson 17:22

Well, thank you for that. That's really touching, moving. I can only imagine what that felt like for you to have that presented to you. Tell me about life in Dallas because Dallas is different than LA. We're not on the prevailing sides of things often.

N

Neil Thomas 17:42

Mostly on the other side. If you think about Texas, you have Dallas, Austin, Houston, and San Antonio that are kind of like the purple bubbles in the midst of a much bigger territory.

M

Mary Wilson 18:05

Austin's not even close to purple, it's so blue, there's no swimming out of that blue oasis.

N

Neil Thomas 18:18

I found it really fascinating being here and not being on the prevailing side - having First Baptist Dallas just down the street and being able to engage him in conversation and find good allies here at Theater of Hope, an interesting congregation, industry and in its present structure, formerly an MCC, and then joined the United Church of Christ about 20 years ago, a congregation that's well respected in the local community, throughout, not

just Christian.

N

Neil Thomas 19:08

I think I've brought all of my experience of the last 25 years into a congregation that is pretty extraordinary and into a social political environment that is changing for Dallas and continues to change for Texas and to bring a progressive voice. I think for me, in my evolving spirituality, I think I moved from just the place of "It's okay to be gay and Christian," to the place of saying "It's okay to be gay and Christian, now what?" What is the acceptance on my belief of God's acceptance of me as a full human being?

N

Neil Thomas 19:56

What does that mean - both in the world, in my own personal life and as being in the United Church of Christ? Certainly my Mormon roots and my roots in the MCC, and the roots of this congregation and MCC, really just merged together so perfectly. For such a time as this was very real and tangible.

N

Neil Thomas 20:31

In the first few years of being here, I'm able to bring some healing between the feelings of MCC when Cathedral left and where the Cathedral is now. I brought Troy Perry to Cathedral so that it could say sorry to Troy, and Troy could say sorry to the congregation.

N

Neil Thomas 20:55

What is an extremely move - it was a gift. I think because I have been in a relationship with Troy for 13 years as his pastor and built that relationship, that he trusted me enough to be able to do this, and to bring some closure for both entities that we could then move on - that many years after the fact that they had already left - and many of the people were still here that knew Troy, loved Troy - it was a wonderful gift, it was it was also a release, so this church could go on and be what it needed to be, which really is, in many ways, a vibrant, inclusive and progressive congregation of the United Church of Christ. That's really where we market ourselves now. We ought to say we're not a gay church, but we're not just a gay church. We're much more than that.

M

Mary Wilson 22:01

Let's move a little bit to the pandemic. Let's start with how that's impacting you personally and professionally. We'll talk about the congregation in a little bit, but in my



interviews with other ministers - well, let me not put words in your mouth. How is this impacting?

**N** Neil Thomas 22:22

I mean, hugely I'm an extrovert and so I love being around people. I get a lot of energy from people. I generally would, most evenings I have meetings or for meetings or whatever - all of that came to a really abrupt stop in March, where we really just abandoned everything. For me personally, it was a culture shock, of suddenly having to be my own company. I've discovered, I actually don't mind my own company.

**M** Mary Wilson 23:14

I was going to say, I hope you discovered that you liked yourself.

**N** Neil Thomas 23:19

Yeah, yeah. I kind of have.

**M** Mary Wilson 23:23

Yeah, that's a good thing. I'm not sure what everyone is experiencing, though? I think we can hide behind business of the task and kind of lose ourselves a little bit in that.

**N** Neil Thomas 23:37

I like who I am. I would actually say that, in some ways, having to really begin to explore, "What do I really believe? What is my real relationship with God?" Because it's no longer about my relationship with God through the church. It's really about, "What is my relationship with God? And how is that impacting both my day to day living experience, which now is perhaps more identical to those that are ministering to than ever before?" In some ways, we're all in the same boat.

**M** Mary Wilson 24:27

What are you doing for the extrovert in you, that thrives on that engagement? How are you working through that?

N

Neil Thomas 24:43

We're now back in the office. I'm fortunate enough that I have a pretty big staff so I get to interact with those folks on a more regular basis than we were before. I was doing a Zoom cocktail hours and stuff with friends online. But I've discovered that after eight hours of Zoom meetings, I'm not really up for another one, even if it's social. That actually I need some downtime. I have a daughter and I get to see her two or three nights a week and we get to hang out - get her to school every morning and making sure that she's taken care of. I'm trying not to use the new normal because I don't want this to be the new normal, but I found some ways around that still feed me and still nurture me, individually. Now professionally, that's a whole different ways to different thing, but certainly on a personal level there are aid workarounds that are helping in my coping mechanisms.

N

Neil Thomas 26:09

Professionally, that's different, not being able to see everybody, preaching is a radically different experience. No longer are you feeding off the energy of the congregation, as you're worshipping. We're pre-recording and putting it together into a package that gets delivered on Sundays and preaching to a camera, rather than a congregation and trying to figure out what "Where is this congregation spiritually?" So, that we have some relevance to what we actually deliver on a Sunday.

M

Mary Wilson 26:54

There we go back to the preaching a little bit, because I think maybe people outside the church don't understand that preaching is not giving a speech. It's an engagement. How do we engage, when we're on one side of a camera and the engaging half is not there. It's a whole different experience and much more challenging, I think.

N

Neil Thomas 27:25

It is much more challenging. You know, I do sermon series to try to develop a theme of a for three to four weeks. I think we just decided very quickly after the pandemic started, that we were going to take whatever time it took to help people. I should try to help people to think about what does it mean to have a faith when there's no church, when there's no gathering, because the church to look when there's no, and to give people resources that help them to have a continual development of their spirituality, without having to be spoon fed it every week at church.



Mary Wilson 28:20

What would you say is the bottom line answer to that? What does it mean to nurture your spiritual faith? The community is not available in the ways you anticipate.



Neil Thomas 28:37

If I go back to that very first experience, when my mum was told she couldn't join, we then just thought, "What does it mean for us to have a faith without the church?" And to understand that, actually, sometimes the building becomes the church, rather than its own relationship with divine and that having it just spoon fed to you is too easy. It's in the grip and dearth of life really takes its shape and, "How can we embrace that in this time? How can we, how can I ensure, that when we regather, whenever that is, that the folks who return are not the same folks spiritually, that they were when we left in March?" Perhaps that's how I can gauge whether I've been successful or not and what tools have we provided, through this medium of actually continues to work and transformation?



Mary Wilson 29:55

Yeah, that really gets into kind of the next question, without even me asking, how do you think your congregation is changing in the midst of this? What do you anticipate will be the feel of the congregation when you have a chance to start returning?



Neil Thomas 30:18

I don't think we'll come back to the levels of personal, in person worship, that we were at pre-COVID for probably two to three years. I think that most congregations who have recently, are reporting about 20 to 25% of their attendance pre-COVID, which means 75% are still worshipping online or not. We have a 70 person choir that leads worship Sunday, neither of those things are going to be present.



Neil Thomas 31:16

Because even when we regather, unless there's a vaccine, that's not going to be part of our worship. We've also reinvented the way we worship over these last nine months. What we do online is very different than what we do in person because we don't have the choir and the membership.



Mary Wilson 31:42

Have you found that the reason you worship is changing? The point or the goal of worship?

N

Neil Thomas 31:52

I think the goal of worship is about connection and engagement. It's not so much about performance. When you have 1000 people in front of you, your performance has to become more important to ensure that we are in and out of the time allotted, you've got another service that's backing up against you. There is a flow that gets people in, through and out so the next people can get in, through and out. It does become more performance. There's nothing wrong with performance, a good theater is good performance, it does something, it's not just about the performance.

M

Mary Wilson 32:45

A good production of Le Mis [Les Misérables] is an incredibly moving thing to experience. So, yes.

N

Neil Thomas 32:53

I think what people have said, the feedback we're getting is that because they're seeing us up close, as close as I'm seeing you now, there's a level of intimacy that's been established between us that perhaps wasn't there before. They are seeing into our homes, they are getting a glimpse about that, so they're seeing, in some ways - I won't say more authentic, but they're seeing - the more human side of our struggle much as the struggle because sometimes you can be put on a pedestal. You have such a close relationship with God and now they're seeing, there's levels of doubt. We're learning by the seat of our pants, just like everybody else is. I think there is something that's being developed, so that when we do come back, we'll have to work at making sure we continue.

N

Neil Thomas 34:10

Because we can't just come back and that was a season and it's done. We have to pay attention, and we have to pay attention to the ways in which we connected people, and make sure that we continue those structures, how we cared for people. We weren't able to care for them in the same ways that we were pre-COVID. We can't be at the hospital bed. We can't be buried in the same ways that we did. Weddings and funerals have looked very different over these last few months. What are the learning pieces of that? What are the learning pieces that everybody was still able to receive Communion during worship, but they received it differently and how can we ensure that people have the permission to

claim own way of doing spirituality that's not prescribed by the church and encouraged to be their own minister.

M

Mary Wilson 35:21

Yeah, I like the phrasing to that, "enabled by the church, supported or encouraged by the church," as opposed to be defined by the church seem like choices, if you will.

N

Neil Thomas 35:39

Mary, one of the things that we're playing with right now is that when we do regather, I'm sure this will not be on the first Sunday, but shortly into that process, is what [I] want everyone to bring with them, what elements they were using at home. I want to set up a huge, huge table, a banquet table, for them to put those elements on the table, so that we can consecrate them together and give total to what they were using, whether that be cookies, and milk, and pain and toast, whatever it was, I want them to bring it in, so that we can burn together. This was just as much fun as it was the bread and cup that we use on the Sunday.

M

Mary Wilson 36:40

Right, right. I love that idea. I'm going to share that with other ministers and let them steal from you. That's a wonderful idea. It raises another question in my mind, have you found during this time, you have tapped into different creative resources than what you have in the past, that you have a new string of ideas about what it means to worship and be in community? I can hear that this particular, you know, consecrating of what people are using at home is one way that may have played out, but are there others?

N

Neil Thomas 37:25

Yeah, we've discovered that we have a whole congregation that we'll never meet because people are now engaged in our digital ministry. Before this, we would broadcast our worship service, and who knows who saw it.

N

Neil Thomas 37:43

Now, we are very intentional about finding out who's watching. This person, Mack, who I think identifies as non-binary, who stumbled across us very shortly after the pandemic started, who has no idea about our choir and orchestra and all the things that we're fancily known for, but who has joined the choir, and is now doing solos and offering this

part of the virtual choir that we have on Sundays and sees themselves as much a member of this congregation, but lives nowhere near Dallas.

N

Neil Thomas 38:40

We're finding over and over again, even when we do regather, we know that we have two productions to do. We have a production that we call our Sunday church experience and we have a production that says our Sunday experience online and they can't be the same because it doesn't translate. We have found that by being creative in our services on Sunday, by doing them from different locations, and having different elements and doing different things and things that we could never have done in the church building because it was too big, has brought a group of people to the table that perhaps would never have come before and we have to pay attention to that.

N

Neil Thomas 39:26

Because in a world that is becoming post Christian, any step of faith, even if it's just watching something online, is something we have to pay attention to. How do we not only pay attention, then encourage people to take their next steps in reclaiming spirituality in exactly the same way.

N

Neil Thomas 39:50

This comes full circle that 50 years ago with LGBT people were reclaiming their spirituality from a church that abandoned them. All of this, if you see the spirit moving through all of this, that's where I see the spirit mostly showing up, is taking my spirits of 30 years ago when I was grappling just like everybody else about reclaiming spirituality, and how are we bringing people who have been rejected by the church, not because they're LGBT, but for numerous other reasons.

N

Neil Thomas 40:31

How do we engage this in a way that allows the spirit to reform the church, beyond building, beyond doctrine, beyond our preconceived ideas of what that looks like? I don't think there's any coincidences. I believe that this is - not that I say COVID is divinely ordered - but God can work through every situation to give us glimpses of the new realm of heaven, and how do we hold on to that, and hope in the midst seems like a hopeless situation. I've said over and over again, Cathedral of Hope is not just in our name, it's what we have to offer. If we can't offer hope right now, then we should be something else, we should be Cathedral of the Hopeless. Our job is to offer hope because that's our name.

M

Mary Wilson 41:34

Yeah, that's beautifully said. Thank you. Oh, we're about at the end of our time. So, I wanted to make sure I ask, is there anything else that you would like to share that I didn't specifically ask about, that maybe you thought about where you went past it, you want to come back to it, anything else that you feel is important to share with folks?

N

Neil Thomas 41:55

The only thing I think that's important for us to hold on to is that no matter what our positions are - senior pastor of this church - I have my own individual relationship with God that I must take care of. I think that by taking care of that relationship, and not just taking it for granted, or ignoring it, or pouring it out on somebody else because that's what clergy do — that I've learned that real commandment of Jesus, "Love God, Love [your]self, Love Others," has become so much more important in my life, that my first line of responsibility and accountability is to God, then it's to myself and then ultimately, it's to allow that to spill over into the love of others.

N

Neil Thomas 42:49

I think that, I'll just say for me, and I'm sure for others, we get that equation the other way around. I think we love others, or God's in there somewhere, and we leave ourselves to the end and that's not a good use of the greatest commandment. I think in these nine months, I've learned to reorder those things and to pay attention to the way that I love myself as a direct reflection of God, in order that I might love others in that same way.

M

Mary Wilson 43:28

You know, it strikes me that in, say, five years, it might be fun to revisit and see how that reordering has changed the way you minister, change the way you care for yourself individually, away from the church, and just how maybe that impacts the church and the spiritual journey of those in your care. I wonder, will we eventually, at some point, go back to the way things were. There's a part of me that says some of that will happen. There's part of me that says it's impossible to go back to the way we were. So, I'm curious about the changes to come.

N

Neil Thomas 44:19

Oh yeah, me too.



Mary Wilson 44:22

I hope at least next summer, not quite a year from now, we'll be able to revisit that to a point and then hopefully, you and I will have the opportunity of the future even apart from this project to revisit that question. Well Neil, I want to thank you for joining me today and appreciate your thoughts and insightfulness. I appreciate your ministry and the impact you have in your community and the state because we've been at the Capitol together, we've stood in argued our case, if you will, at times together, so I appreciate what you do. I hope you have a wonderful day. You take care of yourself.



Neil Thomas 45:13

Bye bye