

**Sarah Leer:** I think we try to figure out the best way to operate in community, um, and to serve God and neighbor and love each other. And, we don't always get it right. Sometimes, we really hit it out of the park. And sometimes, we're next to people in the pews who think very differently. And hopefully, those conflicts can be resolved or conversations can happen.

**Sam Fuqua:** That's Sarah Leer, and this is, Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. In this episode, we talk with Sarah Leer about belonging and broadening diversity in traditional faith communities. Dr. Sarah Leer is a practical theologian who works with young people in the Presbyterian Church and in other faith-based institutions. Her work focuses on affirmation and deepening of belonging, especially in solidarity with LGBTQIA+ people. We spoke with Sarah Leer at the 2024 White Privilege Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi, Alexis.

**Alexis Miles:** Hi, Sam.

**Sam Fuqua:** We're here at the 2024 White Privilege Conference in Tulsa, and Sarah Leer is our guest. Welcome.

**Sarah Leer:** Thank you. Thank you for having me.

**Sam Fuqua:** So, you call yourself a practical theologian. Can you define that term?

**Sarah Leer:** Sure. So, first of all, thanks for having me. It's, it's wonderful to meet y'all. Um, practical theologian is one of those things where in, especially in our tradition, um, and in faith-based institutions, it can sound a little wonky, right? Um, but Christian educator used to be a term that we would use often, and so it's shifted a little bit with faith formation. So, now we talk about being formed in faith from, you know, birth to death, and what that means as you develop as a person, and what that means as the world happens around you, um, and the things that you experience. So, as a theologian, there's so much information and, um, degrees and things I've worked on. But at the same time, how do you apply that to your life? So, as a practical theologian, I'm an educator. Um, I've worked with a lot of youth and young adults. What does that, um, what are those theological implications? What are those places of faith that we can use? How do we connect to God, to each other? How do we serve God and neighbor? And how do we apply that in practical ways? Not, um, and I'm not, you know, there's wonderful things to learn in books and resources and I talk about that all the time, especially as an educator, but my question is, how are we walking every day with people? We know there are a lot of people in pain. There are, people go through all sorts of things in their personal lives and in community. So, my hope is to do my work that can be utilized in every day.

**Alexis Miles:** Can you give an example of what you mean so that I can visualize what you're talking about?

**Sarah Leer:** Sure. So, as a practical theologian, I might, um, for instance, work on a curriculum. Um, something that, you know, could be deeply researched and have all kinds of footnotes and endnotes. And I love to get into depth on something that has a deep theological, um, significance. So, it might be a concept like the Trinity, for instance. And I could have all kinds of books and, uh, articles and all those sorts of

things. But my question in writing a curriculum is if something happens, like if you were to have a family member that had, um, a diagnosis that was scary or, um, if your child or your partner had something going on in their lives, things that happen in people's lives every day, how does that study and that curriculum apply? And so, how does that bring you closer to loving God and loving each other? And how do we, um, interact with our neighbors? So, how are we formed in faith and then how do we live that out?

**Alexis Miles:** So, related to that, earlier you said that you're, you focus primarily on the queer community. You use the word queer. Why do you use that word as opposed to other words?

**Sarah Leer:** What I've noticed in this work, and I'm sure y'all and talking with people have noticed that um, as the community has shifted and changed in terminology over the years, and it really is a generational shift, and so, as I talk with colleagues and friends, um, I will talk about LGBTQIA+ people. And often, um, it becomes, um, you know, really quickly, people will say it very, very fast. Um, and those identities are important and you know, those letters are important for people to find their place in this world. However, queer has also been reclaimed by the community as something that is an overarching term. And in saying that, I will say to, you know, your listeners that, um, it is something that I talk about often in workshops with folks of different generations that that term was used as a slur and was hurled at people. So, I will find in an intergenerational room especially, that Gen Z and millennials, being an elder millennial myself, will use that term more often, maybe Gen X folks, but I do find people sometimes wince. And so, I usually give a caveat, a disclaimer when I'm talking with people in person and I'll say, you know, this is a reclaimed term and it's something that's really helpful, but at the same time, I acknowledge that I have been in rooms where people get really upset. Um, and so that's just something to, kind of, acknowledge, bring that up, um, and make sure that we talk through. I use queer because it's a helpful umbrella term. Um, and so it's one of those places where sometimes you don't know the identity of the folks you're talking with, and so, that's why I use it.

**Sam Fuqua:** So, I was raised in the Presbyterian Church, but it's been a long time since I was active in it, and it was a loving community, but, uh, there was certain elements of patriarchy that were just accepted. You know, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for example. As a millennial, and, you know, talking to, say, a, a girl or a young woman, how do you address that in contemporary Protestant denominations, such as the Presbyterians?

**Sarah Leer:** That's a great question. So, our denomination has gone through all kinds of transformation over the years, and we are not perfect, right? We don't always get it right. Um, and we are a place that has gone through, um, real conversation about LGBTQIA+ ordination. Um, marriage equality was passed in our tradition right before the country passed it. So it was, we are deeply steeped in governmental and hierarchical, um, structure as you know, being part of that. So, those patriarchal pieces happen throughout, they're, they're woven throughout Christian tradition, and they're definitely woven throughout our, you know, Presbyterian tradition, other Protestant traditions. So, what I find, and there's so many wonderful resources about this, but people will say things like, um, "Creator Christ and Holy Ghost" like when you're referencing, you know, Trinitarian or using the doxology. I'll just sing that. Even if it's different in the bulletin, I'm sure people look at me really weird when I'm visiting places, but that's a more inclusive term.

People sometimes say siblings in Christ. So, like when you're talking to a room, you're trying to get folks attention. I use folks a lot. I use friends a lot because I worked with children and youth a lot. It's one of those where if you're speaking to folks instead of saying, ladies and gentlemen, it's one of those retraining

things. And then in the liturgy, you can say, siblings in Christ, let us pray. Right? And so, it's just those little things that are a big deal to our trans and non-binary siblings. So, folks in the community, those are signals of deepening belonging that can feel nuanced, but they're really important for people. And so, that's, that's one thing. I mean, there's so much, um, theologically that people are exploring and pulling apart and parsing, um, and what it means to truly be in community. But there's a, there's a consistent discussion, um, womanist theologians, feminist theologians, uh, more recent theologians, all kinds of folks bringing from their different lived experience, um, to what you're saying there, there's so much we can do in connection with, um, with those reformers, those, those folks from the 16th century, you know, who, um, who are, you know, the founders of this particular tradition. So, I think it's about including in-voices in conversation, um, and then making changes to what you say, you know.

**Sam Fuqua:** There was a big conflict that you referenced a minute ago within the Presbyterian Church over LGBTQ, and there was a split, right?

**Sarah Leer:** Right, and so in the, there have been, um, well, there's all kinds of splinters, right? And so there's, there's different ways of, different Presbyterians, different flavors of these different denominations. The United Methodist Church is going through it currently, so they are, um, they're experiencing that split. Um, it's, it's painful. It's, it's a place of grief for a lot of people, um, for them to examine where they're going to be worshiping, where they're going to find community. Um, so yes, there were people that left the Presbyterian Church USA.

**Sam Fuqua:** Well, it's interesting as a podcast that focuses a lot on conflict resolution, the resolution for these denominations is, well, you go your way, we'll go ours.

**Sarah Leer:** Right, I, I think, well, especially in our tradition, and I can't speak to all the ins and outs of it, but in our tradition, there, we don't do anything quickly. We don't do anything quickly in the Presbyterian church. And so it's, it's those conversations happened over years and years and decades and decades and decades. And I, and you know, when equality, especially, um, LGBTQI+ ordination, I shouldn't say equality, LGBTQI+ ordination came, um, to the forefront and was voted on at general assembly, we had folks who stayed, who still, you know, wrestle with that, right? But they stayed in the pews. And so, I think that's a, that's an interesting piece of this with conflict resolution.

**Sam Fuqua:** Yeah. That's my mom you're talking about. She stayed.

**Sarah Leer:** Yeah. Yeah. And it may be something that, I don't know your mom, but it may be something that, like, she struggles with, um, but it's also the denomination holds a richness in our tradition, um, that connects with people in many ways. And so, it's, it's a changing animal. It doesn't live in a box. It's something that evolves and changes, and, um, it's a living, breathing being, at least I think it should be. And, when we are part of faith traditions, trying to capture the mystery of the divine, we, as humans, can't do that fully, right? So, I think we try to figure out the best way to operate in community and to serve God and neighbor and love each other. And, we don't always get it right. Sometimes, we really hit it out of the park, and sometimes we're next to people in the pews who think very differently, um, and hopefully, those conflicts can be resolved or conversations can happen.

**Alexis Miles:** I hear you talking about language and conflict, and it sounds like language makes a big difference, the language used, the language mutually understood. Can you say more about the impact of language on conflict?

**Sarah Leer:** Yeah, in my experience, language is, um, it's interesting. It's what, it's how we understand each other, and at the same time, we are people of ritual and tradition. In our particular faith tradition, we have the Book of Order and the Book of Confessions, and we have these things that we voted on for many, many years and have put into place, and we hold really tightly to them. Other traditions operate very differently. So for us, it's a lot of conversation, we operate in committees. We really love a committee. And so, we talk and talk and talk and talk. And, it's a very cerebral understanding where other traditions, um, I think are much more tied to emotion and embodiment, which is sometimes why we're called the frozen chosen. Um, because we, you know, it's a joke, but it's also, we have all of these conversations, conversation, conversation. So, I think that's why language comes up so often. Um, we like to talk things through. At some point, again, from my perspective, we've got to make some decisions. Um, and so I think we do that faithfully, and we, we, uh, ask and hope that the Holy Spirit is part of that and, you know, listen for that movement of God in those conversations and, and are hopefully guided by that and each other. I don't think you can take out that communal piece. Um, but you know, we, we talk things through a lot. So, I think that's probably why you're hearing me talk about language so much.

**Sam Fuqua:** A number of Protestant denominations, including the Presbyterians, have been in decline in terms of their membership. Uh, I know there's a, that's a big question, but, uh, I, I guess I'd like to focus it on what you think the church can do and is doing, uh, to reverse that trend.

**Sarah Leer:** Yeah. Well, this might be my most controversial part of your podcast, Sam. Um, so I think a piece of it, um, and I've heard a couple different colleagues say this, so it's not just me. We might just be smaller. That's okay, I think. Um, it's one of those places where, what are we doing to be faithful? Um, how are we, again, I'm not, I mean, saying, I know I've said this many times, but, but how are we in community with each other? How are we serving God and neighbor? Coming back to those places that Christ has asked us to love each other as ourselves. Um, and how do we, how do we operate? How do we do this life together? And so, we're a different place in 2024 than we were in the nineties and in the sixties. And in this country, um, it's the evolution of church and what church means. I was just having this conversation the other day with somebody about the third space, right? If home and work, and the church is that way in a lot of rural communities. Um, and so, you know, I talk with a lot of people in rural spaces and that third space is so vital, um, because maybe larger communities have different spots.

So, I think the church can adapt. I think we can evolve. Um, I think it's about listening to what neighbors need, especially in those smaller communities. Is it a space, I mean if you're asking me to dream, Sam, is it a space that, that community needs? You know, a place for folks to have town halls. Is it, um, if, if that church is getting smaller, is it looking at your space and asking who needs it? Can we, uh, can we charge very, very little for this? Is it a place where the community can gather? I like to talk about asset-based community development a lot. Where are the folks in town? Do they need a spot? Do they need office space? Um, I often find people will say, "Well, we don't use these rooms anymore. We have a bunch of Sunday school rooms." And so, I mean, if asked, I will say, well, are there places that, is there a nonprofit that needs that room? I've heard of churches doing creative things like that. I think I saw a story the other day about a church that became a library, right? Can those buildings have new life? I know of communities that don't meet in traditional, kind of, church spaces. Um, they've moved out, right? They, they find

community and ways to live, um, differently. And so I think, I think that's probably a piece of it. Um, what does your community need? What are, the people need around you? And how can you serve them?

**Alexis Miles:** You've talked about community, committees, groups of people being together. Does the doctrine provide for how to resolve conflicts when people are coming together as a group?

**Sarah Leer:** In our tradition...

**Alexis Miles:** Yeah, tradition.

**Sarah Leer:** Yeah, yeah. So, um, I think people come about it in different ways. It's such a great question. I think, you know, personally, I'm a collaborative, um, conflict person. So, I'm not somebody that seeks out conflict necessarily, but I'm not an avoider of conflict. So, when there is something that comes up, which happens again, all the time, you got people. And, what I've learned as a church worker is that oftentimes people bring other things to that space, right? It's always something else. It's never, this is a, you know, super secret church thing. Not really. Um, is that it's never really about the thing, right? So, if somebody is upset, for instance, about, um, tables got moved in a room and they didn't expect that to happen and that's a conflict that comes up, it's often about something else in their own lives. And they, that will bubble up within them. So, it's one of those where those conflicts come up and often I will find that I'm the person that wants to know why. So, tell me more or if I, if you can tell me, you know, if I can get to a vulnerable space with you and you can be vulnerable with me and tell me about maybe what's going on in your world because I don't really think it's about the tables, right? I don't really think it's about this particular conflict. It could be. It could be that you're very connected to that.

But I think it's really about how we come together on a human level, treating each other as whole people, with dignity and kindness, because in church, in church world, I hope that that's what we're really doing, is living that out. So I, I find that it does involve time and vulnerability and trust, authenticity. I mean, I know that word gets thrown around a lot, but I love it. Intentionality. Like why? Is there something that we can let go? Is there something that we're holding on to? Is there fear? Is that the root of this conflict, right? Is it something that we can just do differently? Do we just need to make a different solution and be creative? So, yes, I, I mean, We're in, yeah, committees are how we operate, so that's kind of how my brain is, but I think we do this, I think we do life and church better together.

**Sam Fuqua:** Well, we usually ask our guests, picking up on the title of the program, to tell us about a sideways moment for you where something went off track, what happened, what you learned.

**Sarah Leer:** Well, so I wanted to, um, I made notes here to talk to y'all about some, uh, just kind of generally, I, I do some consulting work as well as, um, my doctoral research. So, I was going to tell you a little bit about my research. Um, so in my research I worked with youth and, uh, they were my co-leaders in, in my project. So, I worked with a group of youth and I used participatory action research, which is a social justice-based methodology. And, in putting us all together, getting five youth together as leaders, um, how did we get all of those folks and they invited adults to be part of my project? So, I worked with the youth as co-leaders, and then they went and invited adults to be part of this. So, in that, um, the conflicts that came up are, were mostly around logistics, at first. How do we get schedules? How do we align everybody? What do we do here? What do we do here? But also, I was talking about youth as my

co-leaders, um, and they were teaching adults about LGBTQIA+, um, affirmation, celebration, and the theology that surrounds that. So, I did have some conflict of people asking me why we need to talk about this. Um, most people were pretty supportive because it was this project that I did. Um, but I did have people asking me, you know, what are we talking about? What's happening? What's going on here? So, the conflicts that came up were, um, how we aligned people.

And then, uh, we had a little bit, again, logistically. And then we had a couple of conflicts, um, with the youth. And nothing serious, but something I just thought was interesting to share with y'all. The youth were accustomed, and I observed this in real time, of the adults telling them what to do, and where to be, and where to go. That is how they're socialized. And then, using this methodology, I address them as co-leaders. So, how can we work together? What should, and I give them my curriculum. I ask them to tell me what you like about it. Tell me the feedback. How can I change it? And I would then respond to them, change the curriculum. Then I wrote a framework. Hey, what should I change in this? They would come back and say, change this and this and this. And so, I, you know, I'm, I'm using conflict maybe in a different way. It wasn't a huge blow up, but we had a little bit of tension because I would ask them to tell me what they felt about it, and then it took time for them to really own the project as their own.

And so, it was one of those where I didn't anticipate that as a place of, um, something that we would need to work through. I thought that they would take to it like ducks to water. I thought that the teenagers would say, "Great! Let's go." And some of them did, but some of them, it just took some time. They were a little hesitant. Um, and to me that was seeing like how maybe they were socialized. And so that's, that's something that I learned is over and over and over again, assuring them that they were my co-leaders in this project, calling them co-leaders. Asking them questions. Telling them that we had to move forward, um, together. That we cannot go to the next step of the process without you, like, I need you to come along with me. So, that's, that's a little bit about, you know, just, things that we ran up against, um, and they, they feel like subtle barriers, nothing, like I said, it wasn't a huge explosion. We all got along really well. But I just didn't anticipate those roadblocks, those places where we, we kind of needed to work through it as a collaborative team.

**Sam Fuqua:** Yes, I was listening to you. I was thinking, well, you were building trust.

**Sarah Leer:** Yeah. Right. Right. That's a really good point. Yes. And, and I think, you know, because I was an adult they knew, but we're in a different place. Right? When you're, when we shift as co-leaders in this project, it shifted to, I'm asking them to bring voice and agency to the table. And I don't know how often teenagers are really asked that in our world and in our different systems. And I think, um, it was wonderful. They enriched so much of the project. The project is, was successful because of them. I could not have done what I did without them, but it just took, it just took time. And like you said, trust building. Um, and it also took me stepping back sometimes. And, um, I would say to them, and, you know, wrote this up as part of my dissertation too, I would say, alright, well you're going to lead this part. And then I sit back and just wait. And sometimes that caused anxiety, right? But, um, at the end of the day, they figured it out. They picked it up. And if they're truly my co-leaders, if they are truly my collaborators, then, um, then I have to stop, right? I cannot, I cannot try to pull us along or I'm not doing, I'm not respecting them as truly, you know, collaborators in the project.

**Alexis Miles:** I am curious about how adults responded to being led by young people, because that really flips that paradigm.

**Sarah Leer:** It does. I think that's why it was so, such an exciting project for me. Um, it's one that I hope to enact in other faith-based spaces as part of my consulting work. It was so much fun. I have to tell you, it was such a great time. So great to watch them come alive, to bring their expertise. Um, the data and the research was fascinating. And so, um, you know, did surveys and conversations with them. The adults loved it. They also, um, they also just like had this, they just had this wonderful, wonderful feedback of we need to listen to our young people. Our young people need to be leading us all the time. I learned so much. The fascinating data from the teenager side also was, um, I need to be more patient with some of the adults in my life because I found our conversation, they would share about things that they are used to talking about with their peers that the adults were not aware of. Right? So, when they talked about LGBTQIA+ terminology or gender identity, the adults had a lot of questions and we took a lot of time and we just had to slow down. But the teenagers talk about that stuff all the time. They talk about it with their peers all the time. Gen Z is steeped in that conversation. Um, obviously in different places around the country, but they talk about it pretty often as a, that's at least what the data is telling us. So, they, they responded really well, um, but the teenagers had, had to say, I learned that I needed to slow down, that I needed to look at, be more patient. That I needed to, um, approach this conversation a little bit differently than I do with my friends.

**Alexis Miles:** You just described one difference that teenagers are more likely to talk about a wider range of gender issues, you know, gender identity, et cetera. Are there some other things you notice? Like, is there a different approach to the way the teenagers were dealing with conflict than, um, adults?

**Sarah Leer:** That's a great question. In this particular project, or you mean in my work with them?

**Alexis Miles:** In this project, or any work, or any of your research.

**Sarah Leer:** Thanks. Yeah, I think as, as part of the research, what I noticed about this group is that, um, and they know each other, that what was helpful is that they were really strong when they were a full group. So, we had to break into two separate groups just scheduling wise, trying to get 13 people together was an issue. Let me just tell you. So, the way I had it originally planned, you know, as per the title of your podcast, that went really sideways. So, we had to split it up and I sent out all the emails. Can we do it this day at 2:30? Okay. 2:45, you know. Um, the teenagers really do, they do so much of their communicating with the supercomputer in their pocket. They are texting each other. They are talking constantly. There's, you know, data out there that they're on their phones at least six hours a day. So, that's, most, most of them would say, oh, I mean, much, much more than that. They're constantly connected and they're global digital natives, right? They know what's happening way before anybody else.

So, what I noticed is they did really well together. It was that previous trust and relationship that they built upon and they were, um, they resolved conflict, I think they relied on their shorthand with each other. And so, what I would find is that when they got nervous or anxious, they would start to, kind of, look at each other, again they knew each other, but they would start to look at each other and say, like, kind of, without words, you, it's your, gonna, time to go, okay, now, all right, I'm going to jump in there. They would lead that class beautifully. And when I sat back, as an adult, when I was humble enough, and really checked myself and would have to make notes to myself of, okay, let's check in on this later, I really had to stop. And then they would resolve the conflict or not even conflict, but they would really just resolve whatever those bumps were as a unit. So, that's what I learned as, those, man, I love Gen Z, but they, they talk all the time, and they have an empathy, at least the ones I've worked with, empathy and authenticity, that I have not

always found with other generations. There's something, there's something about, I'm not sure what it is. Is it knowing more about what's happening in the world? Is it things are on fire all the time?

As I said, I said that on a podcast the other day, things are on fire all the time and they have to constantly be resilient and, and just build up this arsenal of, um, this depth of vulnerability with each other. I'm not totally sure what it is. But, but they're constantly taking in information. And I think they, when they find their people, they find their people. And so, there's a lot of folks out there, not to get on a tangent, but there's a lot of folks out there who I think say that the phones are distracting, but part of my goal in working with teenagers is to help them do it in a healthy way. They're going to be on their phones. Phones are not over. They're not going away. How do you do it in a healthy way? And to get back to the word community, how are you connecting with your people? You can disengage, you can put your phone away, and that's healthy and helpful. But also, when you're having a tough day, how easy is it to rely on the people that you know are going to respond? And they respond so quickly. I know that wasn't exactly your question, but they were just there for each other.

**Sam Fuqua:** Sarah Leer, thank you for spending this time with us and sharing about your work.

**Sarah Leer:** Thank you. I appreciate you.

**Alexis Miles:** Thank you so much for being with us.

**Sam Fuqua:** Dr. Sarah Leer is a practical theologian who works with young people in the Presbyterian Church and in other faith-based institutions. Her work focuses on affirmation and deepening of belonging, especially in solidarity with LGBTQIA+ people. We spoke with Sarah Leer at the 2024 White Privilege Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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