



## PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

# S6E13: Faith, Transformation, and Engaging Across Differences with Jen Bailey

**Published: May 1, 2026**

[00:00:00] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** Harm is a part of the human experience. Because we live, we get hurt and we do harm. It's, it's part of who we are. And repair is a practice, not a performance. It doesn't happen because we say the right thing or we have to prove we're good. It happens because we choose to remain in a relationship without denying harm or abandoning ourselves.

[00:00:35] **Sam Fuqua:** That's Jen Bailey, 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 Reverend Jen Bailey about faith, transformation, and engaging across differences.

She founded the Faith Matters Network and co-founded The People's Supper, which brings diverse groups of people together to break bread and engage on community issues. Reverend Jen Bailey is also the executive director of the Maddox Fund, a philanthropic foundation based in Nashville, Tennessee. I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles.

Hi, Alexis.

[00:01:29] **Alexis Miles:** Hi, Sam.

[00:01:30] **Sam Fuqua:** And we're super excited to have Jen Bailey with us for this edition of Well, That Went Sideways. Hello.

[00:01:38] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** Thank you all so much for having me.

[00:01:41] **Sam Fuqua:** We're glad you're here. Can you introduce yourself a little bit to our listeners? Because you have such an interesting background and involved in a few different things, can you share a little bit about yourself and, and how you came to, uh, the work you do today?

[00:01:54] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** Absolutely. So my name is, um, Reverend Jen Bailey. I use she/her pronouns. I am the daughter of Christine, who is the daughter of Harriet, who is the daughter of Helen, who is the daughter of Carrie, who is the daughter of Sally. Um, and I often begin by introducing myself through my matrilineal line, 'cause I come from a long line of Black women, um, who originated out of the South, and whose presence I think I carry with me no matter where I go.

Um, I'm also, I get to add this now, in the last five years, I'm also somebody's mama to somebody's mama. Um, I have a son, Max, who's five, and a daughter, Celia Pearl, who's two, um, who I see as a continuation of that long legacy of, of really Curious folks. Um, if I had to say one thing about my family line, it was filled with women who were curious, who attempted to meet the moment they were in against some of the harshest pressures of Jim and Jane Crow in the South.

But who've made a way, as we say in my church tradition, out of no way. Um, by training, I am clergy in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and I spent the better part of the last 10 or so



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years of my career really thinking about what it means for us to cultivate spaces of belonging, particularly for those who've been pushed to the margins of our society and who don't have spaces to call home.

That manifested, in particular in my career, in two primary spaces. The first being an organization I founded a decade ago called Faith Matters Network, which accompanies spiritually grounded leaders on their journey to heal themselves and their communities. And now, um, I left that, and I could talk about that, the process of letting go, which I think is part of, uh, as we think about conflict, one of the things that holds us back is letting go.

And now I am here in Nashville, Tennessee, where I reside, and I lead a foundation, the Dan & Margaret Maddox Fund. Um, and we envision a world in which people and planet really come together and thrive in regenerative systems free from harm or threat. And so I'm now on the funder end of things, which is its own space of needing repair.

Um, and so happy to tap into any parts of that, uh, little bio in this conversation.

[00:04:04] **Alexis Miles:** Well, Jen, you mentioned meeting the moment. And when I think of conflict resolution, that's part of what I think about. How do we meet this moment that we find ourselves in? So what is it about this background that you just described that allows you to be present for the moment?

[00:04:24] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** You know, I think one thing that is true about me is that one of the gifts of being trained in a theological context of going to seminary is learning about one thing that wasn't official, something I learned, right, but the ministry of presence. So what does it mean for us to be present and show up for people, not with our, um, answers, but in a true posture of curiosity and accompaniment?

And so I think that has served as a core, uh, building block for my understanding of what it means to show up in tough moments, whether that be tough interpersonal moments or tough moments in our society. How can we lean in and try to hear one another's stories more deeply to get to the root of what might be the source of the conflict in our lives, um, and move from a space of rupture to one of repair.

[00:05:19] **Alexis Miles:** So can you give an example of that? Maybe two examples, one on the personal side and one on the more public professional side.

[00:05:29] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** Oh, gosh, yeah. Um, personal side. I do, I do belong to a church, and I feel like um- I love a shout-out to Greater Bethel AME Church here in Nashville. And I, you know, I think one of the things that I love about being, um...

I'm not as young as I used to be. I'm 38, so, but a yel- relatively young person in the life of the church. In the church, I'll be young until I'm 50, right? That's just where we are in, in Protestant denominations these days. One of the beauties of being a part of that community is that it is one of the few intergenerational communities that I have in my life, and statistics show us that more and more we're being segregated by generation, especially here in the US.



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And so, um, with that gift of intergenerationality comes its own sources of conflict, whether it be around, in the context of our congregational life, the style of worship, right? Are we singing hymns every Sunday, or are we doing particular types of praise and worship songs, right? Or, you know, um, expectations around how one dresses when they go into the church, right?

All of those things seem petty, but they're kind of ordinary spaces of conflict, and learning how to move through those and understand one another, even when I might fervently disagree with some of my beloveds in my congregation. I think it's interesting, as clergy, I have to, have to play a pretty neutral base even though I have very strong opinions on these types of things and, um, deconstructing the sort of sexism, misogyny, and heterosexism that can seep into our congregational life.

Um, uh, so not neutral, but, you know, I often find myself being a broker in different spaces, right? And bridge generationally to try to translate what can sometimes feel like ill intent, but is often a misinterpretation of language, right? Or understanding, right? And so I'd say that in my personal life. I mean, I, I was, I was...

You know, I'm also the mom of two small children, so I, I regularly am trying to navigate conflict over toys, over small children who don't have, um... In the case of my daughter, who's two, going on 20, but still two, right, doesn't have language and doesn't have the sort of brain development to avoid conflict.

She also is a, she's a roaring Leo, and, like, very much wants her voice to be heard, accompanied by my very orderly, um, very sensitive Virgo son, right? So, like, as I'm thinking about all the practices that I've learned, and I think maybe this is a human thing, right? In my personal life, sometimes those I- practices go out the window when I'm just trying to get them to stop screaming at each other.

But the beauty in, um, seeing my children as my teachers and not just beings that I'm trying to teach is that they model for me every day what rupture and repair can look like. They love each other fiercely. If anyone else messes with their brother or sister, it is on, right? And- They're able to navigate through that conflict together by centering the love and shared values, right?

They wouldn't articulate it this way, but they have. So that would be, I think, a few examples on the personal end of things that I'm, I'm sitting with as I think about my life right now. And then professionally, um, you know, one of the projects that had the real privilege and honor to co-found after the 2016 presidential election here in the US was a project called The People's Supper.

And the intention of that project, which started as a campaign called 100 Days, 100 Dinners, was in the wake of what was a very volatile election cycle, um, filled with toxic rhetoric. I think if we had known in 2016, 10 years ago, what we know now, it would have seemed tame, right? You know, it came together with two colleagues, um, in very different fields.

My colleague Lennon Flowers, who at the time was leading an organization called The Dinner Party that does work around grief and loss with 20 and 30-somethings, and my colleague Emily May, who runs an organization called Right To Be that does work around street harassment. And even though we had very radically different missions in our organizations, I think the thread that



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came together for us was, how are we, in this moment of rupture, going to move towards a space of healing and repair as a society?

And the, the tool that we, um, leveraged through that first 100 days of the first Trump administration and beyond, as it was rebranded The People's Supper, was meals. Um, meals and conversation as a, a tool, um, for repair. And, you know, I think one thing that's often true is that while we talk about sort of these big trends in polarization and division, you know, much of our conflict work focuses on moments of crisis and rupture, but most harm, you know, as we think about it, happens in the ordinary relational spaces, right?

Um, in spaces like the kitchen, in, in text threads, in boardrooms, in faith communities. And meals, we found through that work, and we hosted well over 2,000 suppers in the first five years of that project, are one of the few remaining ordinary spaces where people can still gather across difference, not to fix something, but to be together.

And so I'm really interested in what happens when we treat those ordinary spaces as sites of repair and not just sites of avoidance. We, we underestimate, again, these ordinary spaces as sites not only of repair, but sites of training ground and formation. If I had to reflect on one thing that I think is missing in today's society is that we don't have enough spaces that are geared towards the type of Personal and, in the case of my vocational life, right, spiritual formation that allows people the tools to know how to navigate conflict, to ask questions, how to stay in it with one another even when things are, um, getting tough.

Um, I think what I'm, I'm trying to articulate is a type of moral formation, um, that only happens when we are in relationship with one another, and most often happens well when we're in intergenerational spaces together that embody a type of reciprocal learning, right? So I, I often say, like, I'm, I'm a big fan of saying I learn from both the senior saints and my playground prophets, right?

Like, there's something about the moral formation that comes from knowing that we don't all have the answers, and yet we are committed to moving through and working through conflict together and embracing nuance together. And I think in the absence of those spaces, um, of moral formation, whether that happen in secular, whether it happens in secular or spiritual spaces, right, we have abdicated that to, in some cases, technology, social media, our politics, right?

Like, our id- political ideologies have become a new form of theology, have become gods to many of us. And so I have a lot of quandaries about how we, how we turn the corner back, and, you know, I have the gift of having kids, so I'm learning how to do that in real time right now with my own children.

[00:12:57] **Sam Fuqua:** So if we're at the table and the goal is to repair, but I've come to the table not wanting to deal with conflict, I just wanna have a meal, make some small talk, I would prefer to avoid it, right?

Help our listeners to understand what are some of the nuanced techniques that might bring that to a place of repair or at least introduce that idea amongst people who, who thought they were just sitting down to eat and didn't wanna get into any of this stuff. You know what I mean?



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[00:13:28] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** Well, I would say the first step is to make sure nobody's blindsided by the type of conversation you wanna have, right?

So one of the most beautiful things about a table is that you can extend an invitation to it, right? And so, um, and extending an invitation to the table, um, and extending an invitation to a shared meal, being clear with folks about the type of conversations that you want to have feels essential to me because nobody wants to be blindsided when they're just trying to enjoy their cheesecake, right?

And so I wanna say a word, I think, about meals as a tool for conflict rather than a detour from it. I think at its best, when we leverage meal sharing as a tool for conflict resolution, it's not about niceness or bypassing justice. It's about creating conditions where truth can actually be told and received.

You know, I think in an era of social media that's so shaped by speed and shame and spectacle, meals offer an opportunity to slow our nervous system down. And that that slowness is not neutral. It can be a countercultural intervention, um, to systems that reward domination and certainty and, uh, in some cases performative righteousness, right?

Right. It invites us to, uh, reconnect with some- one of the most basic parts of what it means to be human, which is the need to eat. It is something that is sacred, right? And so for me, one of the tools that was so essential in our founding of The People's Supper was not just the sort of shared meal aspect.

We always served meals family style so that people were kinda forced to interact. But we also grounded that, um, pedagogy in open and honest questions that guided the conversation, and there was always a facilitator at the table that we had trained to be able to, um, guide the conversation. I remember people were so struck.

We did a series of conversations about the 2018 midterm elections in five purple states, so it was North Carolina and Michigan and Pennsylvania, places like that, where we brought together conservatives and, um, more liberal-leaning folks to break bread together. And I think many people were... who were invited into those spaces of bridging were expecting us to ask questions like about their politics or about their points of view on particular social issues.

And the questions that we always grounded when were ones of belonging. So describe a time when you were made to feel other or made to feel isolated or cast out. How did that make you feel? And then following up with times that you were in spaces that made you feel fully alive, fully human, fully seen in the particularities of your stories.

And then the third question was, um, in that series, "So how can we create more of the second?" That was not the conversation I think people were expecting to have, um, for a campaign called The Midterm Five. But it was the type of conversation that I think is absent in our politics, um, and remains absent in our politics, which is What is the common good that we are trying to aspire towards, and how do we get there?



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And it's okay for us to have competing, um, ideas about the particularities of that common good. What's not okay is for you to dehumanize me in your pursuit of what you believe the common good is, right? How can we move towards a space where we actually are building a society in which everybody can thrive or, in, you know, movement language we often talk about in social movements, collective liberation.

And I always feel challenged. I'm like, "Do I really mean collective, like everybody? I want everybody to get free? Like everybody, everybody?" Well, then that's a faith claim, whether a, like a secular one or not, right? And s- and saying that there is something worthwhile for me to pursue in my engagement with you, even if we have, um, diametrically opposed worldviews.

Like, there's something that you have to teach me, and that is a type of, um, curiosity that requires a type of rigor, but also requires a deep vulnerability and preparation. Because I also don't know if in some of these bridging spaces it's always ethical to ask people to bridge for the sake of bridging if they haven't been, again, invited to the table and have opportunity to either accept or decline that invitation.

[00:17:55] **Alexis Miles:** That's a very mature orientation and stance. How did you get there? How did you reach that level of maturity, and what can people who sense that, "Oh, I wanna be able to do that"?

[00:18:09] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** I would first say don't paint me as a model of courage. Um, I, I think sometimes the type of, um, maturity that you're alluding to starts with just being willing to take a risk and being brave enough, um, to take a risk, and open enough to be transformed, right?

To, to change your mind. And I think that is, as we talk about moral formation and maturity and, and perhaps even moral courage in this season, is I don't know how many people are being incentivized either in their day-to-day lives, in their interpersonal relationships, to, um, be open to changing our minds and to be...

And that feels like a lost art, and I'm not quite sure how we get back there other than testing and trying, right? Like, and being willing to sit in the imperfection and the nuance o- of that. As I think about what I learned from the People's Supper experience- You know, I think we saw that again and again that people are willing to take risks at a table that they never would take in a meeting or online at times.

Uh, we saw that structure matters, so I me- I alluded to we had a set of shared agreements, intentional questions, and a rhythm that prioritized listening over responding, which felt really essential. And I think one of the things that surprised me most was that people did not come to be convinced, they came to be understood.

And that understanding doesn't erase difference, but it changes how conflicts moves through a relationship, right? Um, and that to me, those lessons are ones that continue to sit with me as I think about my, my work today and how I navigate my interpersonal relationships. I'll also say this as I'm sort of reflecting more about the People's Supper and what I learned, that the, the work of building towards repair, whether using dinner or meal sharing as a technology to get there or not, um, it's not about resolution.



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I think it's a relational skill. I think one of the biggest misconceptions that we have about conflict is that the goal is necessarily resolution. Um, and I don't know. In some cases, we're never gonna reach resolution. Uh, one of the projects that I had the opportunity to partner with some dear friends on several years ago was called Pathways to Repair.

Um, so it was sort of thinking about the stickiness of what holds us back from being able to move through moments of rupture to a space of, of repair. And a couple of things that I remember learning from that project, and for your listeners who are curious, we still... That website is still live. There's a beautiful guide, and we got to interview e- experts in repair if you go to [pathwaystorepair.org](http://pathwaystorepair.org), um, as a tool and resource.

And we created this really beautiful, like, visual guide that's like a visual story. Um, it's really pretty, and it's available as a free resource for everyone. Some of the things that I learned through doing that project and listening, um, to some of the experts that we interviewed for it was thinking about repair, in the context of repair, things like readiness.

That readiness is not about forcing closure or, uh, responsibility. That responsibility is not mutualizing harm, right? Relationship and not reputation management, right? Like, those are some of the conditions as we think about repair. And I recognize that a shared meal doesn't solve conflict, right? But it does help people build the relational muscle needed to stay present when things start going sideways, right?

Thinking about the title of this podcast, right? And that sort of muscle. And it's the new year, and I made this commitment to myself to start working out again, right? So I'm very much in tune with how my muscles are functioning, and those muscles that have not been touched in a very long time, right? But you know, it, it's painful.

And I can say, having gone to the gym this morning, it's very painful to start exercising and stretching things that haven't stretched in a long time. But I can already feel myself getting stronger through the repetitions. Um, and so I think the same thing is true when we think about relational muscles that we need to build, and that meal sharing is just one tool that helps us get there.

As we think about meal sharing as a tool for conflict resolution or relational repair, it has to be designed with power in mind and not assumed to be benign. So I think that really means asking who set the invitation, whose norms are being centered, who bears the emotional labor, and that repair that ignores power isn't repair.

It's sort of like reconciliation theater, right? It's, uh, um, it can be performative. I do believe that everyday conflict is that training ground for a restorative world, that we often want society to be more restorative without practicing restoration in our daily lives. This goes back to the question around maturity, and what I was thinking I was trying to get at around, like, moral formation, that the way we handle a tense family dinner or a misunderstanding at work or a moment of withdrawal f- with someone we love is our conflict training.

Um, is that, uh, those reps at the gym? It is the thing that helps us build that muscle. And that meals are one way that gives us a low-stakes rehearsal space for those higher stakes



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[00:23:53] **Sam Fuqua:** conflict,

[00:23:54] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** right?

[00:23:56] **Sam Fuqua:** Can you tell us a little bit more about Faith Matters, how that came about and the work, and then how you left the organization?

[00:24:08] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** So Faith Matters founded in 2014, coming out of seminary at Vanderbilt Divinity School. And I think I was 26 years old. We founded a, I founded FNM in the summer of 2014, right after Mike Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, right? So sort of a moment of political and social uprising, and noticing the roles in which my friends who I went to seminary with, who were also community organizers who were in the street, how spiritually and deeply depleted they were feeling in their movement work, even those who were getting theologically trained at a seminary, right?

And as I looked around at some of my peers and colleagues and saw, particularly among those who were fighting for justice, increasing rates of stress-related disease, increasing rates of suicidal ideation, addiction, right, emerging, um, in the context of this experience of primary and secondary trauma in movement work, I think Faith Matters Network was really founded as a response, um, as a space through a womanist theological lens, so grounding the wisdom, ingenuity, experience of Black women's knowledge as a core, um, organizing principle for our work to accompany those spiritually grounded leaders on their journeys to heal themselves and their communities and their world, right?

And so for us at F&M, um, during my tenure, it took a lot of different forms from standing up one of the first, um, social movement chaplaincy programs and training grounds for which we, we seeded, um, over the course of about five years, which was wonderful, and it was very cool. It was very cool to be a part of a movement of, like, a lot of people doing this similar work, knowing and understanding that spirit and movement and accompaniment and movement was gonna be essential to the work ahead.

Um, so shout-outs to all my colleagues, both at F&M and beyond, who were thinking about that, that question for folks, and healing justice as a framework for how we do movement work. But we also did a lot of work in cohorts with clergy and lay leaders who were doing work on economic justice in places like Arkansas or thinking about concepts like democracy as a spiritual practice in North Carolina.

And at the core of that was so many people we noticed were feeling isolated. So they might be serving a congregation or serving in a leadership role, and what we know about being a leader is that you, you can feel like you're on your own often. And so those cohort experiences served as a way to connect people with others who were similarly aligned in values and worldview and give them the sort of tools and relational muscle to keep going through it and over the course of their lifetime.

And so it was a beautiful work. It was a beautiful work that was seeded in me. And, um, having spent my entire vocational life and career in the nonprofit sector, I also knew there's a tendency of



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founders to stick around too long. Um, and you know- I'll say this. My therapist would joke that I would like, I was trying to give F&M away since the second year.

But I think a number of things kind of, um, came together at once for me. Um, one is that I started having like real, like my own babies, and recognized that in having my own children and stepping into motherhood as a vocational identity for myself, um, I no longer could give Faith Matters Network and the work the type of attention that it needed to give it.

Um, and two, that while tempting to keep creating, um, the organization in my own image and my own interests, I never thought that the organization was mine to hold alone. For me, it was a spiritual practice of like this is a place that God's spirit has given me to tend during this season, and it's mine to steward during this season, but it's not mine to hold.

Um, and so I think it all reached a, a climax when I had my second baby and I was like, "I just can't be on planes anymore the way that I wanted to, and live the type of life that I want to, and being present in their early years in the way that I want to." And so all that led to the sort of decision to it's time to go.

And I was ready to go. And shout outs to Reverend Brianna Shaw Robinson, who is the executive director of Faith Matters Network today, and just an incredible human being, um, who is leading the organization now. And I think one of the other things I'll say is that when I took on my new role, um, as executive director of the Dana Margaret Maddox Fund here in Nashville, I inherited it from my, um, my colleague Kaki, who had herself been the founder of a nonprofit and founding executive director two or three times over.

And so this is where mentorship becomes important, right? She saw me struggling to let go and modeled so beautifully as I was stepping into my role. She stayed on to help with consulting for a few months how to let go. So whenever I felt myself tempted to be pulled back in to the drama or pulled back in to a particular type of decision-making, um, I would look to Kaki and, um, remember, right, the beautiful way in which she modeled letting go for me, which helped me let go.

I resigned from the board the third week that Brianna was officially in her role, and I told her very like, "Girl, call me if you need me. Also blame me if you need me," right? "If you need to," right? Like, "You have full permission to throw me on the bus with funders if something hasn't gone right.

And like do a real assessment, an honest like intake of what is going well for this org and what is not," right? Um, 'cause I think sometimes we get into these patterns of complacency within organizations where we can't see our own faults. And so I share all that to say it's been a gift. I feel like I left my ba- I left one baby and sent it off to college, and it's, you know- Doing all the things that kids in college do.

And I've been able to let go, trusting in the wisdom, knowledge, and experience of this amazing Black woman who took over. Um, and that has been a true gift.



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[00:30:32] **Alexis Miles:** One thing I'm curious about, Jen, if you had one message to share with everybody on Earth, like in this one moment everybody on Earth is listening to Jen, what would that message be?

[00:30:48] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** I guess if I was gonna leave your listeners with anything, it would be moving us to, um, a place where we understand that repair offers and asks a third thing of us, which is to stay and tend when moments get sticky or rough. And that meal sharing is just one way to practice what it means to stay embodied, to listen without collapsing or dominating, and to hold complexity without rushing to fix it.

Harm is a, is a part of the human experience, right? Because we live, we get hurt and we do harm. It's, it's part of who we are. And repair is a practice, not a performance. It doesn't happen because we say the right thing or we have to prove we're good. It happens because we choose to remain in relationship without denying harm or abandoning ourselves.

And in a fractured world, choosing to sit at the table, whether that be the metaphorical table or the dinner table, with intention, humility, and accountability can be a quiet but radical act that brings us back to ourselves and brings us back to one another.

[00:32:05] **Sam Fuqua:** Reverend Jen Bailey, thank you so much for, for spending time with us.

[00:32:09] **Rev. Jen Bailey:** Thank you.

[00:32:11] **Sam Fuqua:** Reverend Jen Bailey is the founder of the Faith Matters Network and co-founder of the People's Supper. She's also the executive director of the Maddix Fund. You can connect with Jen Bailey at her website. It's [reverendjen.com](http://reverendjen.com).

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