

S01E09 Leaving the Church

SPEAKERS

Michael Gungor, Ray Abel, Caitlin Werth

Ray Abel 00:00

Hello, and welcome to research the News. This week we're talking about why Americans are leaving the church. There's been a recent news article and Gallup poll that talked about the number of US adults who belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque. And it was pretty shocking. The number of people who belong to a church in 1937 was 73%. Now, that was a long time ago. But remarkably, that number was still at 70% in the year 2000. So the number of people in churches after 63 years, only decreased by 3%. But in 2020, only 47% of US adults belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque. The weird thing is that overall, 65% of the US identifies as Christians, and only 4%, identified as atheist. So it seems like there may be a lot of people who have faith, but who have lost faith in the church as an institution. And as someone who found his faith later in life and attended church almost every Sunday for a year straight, but has since taken some time off from a church building. I've seen a lot of the good that comes from organized religion. And I've also seen some of the issues firsthand. And I think that people who stay in a church sometimes do it out of obligation, or an attachment to a specific church or pastor, which can be a negative, but the people who leave may have valid reasons for doing so, but often are not doing anything to change what they've seen as issues. So today, we're talking with a pastor who is staying in the church, and a Grammy nominated musician and composer who left the Christian church, but still is seeking to make changes. The musician is Michael Gungor, the host of the liturgist podcast and formerly of the band Ganga. And he also just put out a new album, under the name way will, and you can actually hear a sample playing in the background right now. And the pastor is our former guest from our prison reform episode, and also a personal friend of mine, Caitlyn worth. So let's get started. Hey, there, guys, how are you? Great. Good. Yeah, good. Well, I'm glad to have you guys both in the show. And we're going to start out the way we always do with what's your bias. So if you're the first time listening to the show, we always want to talk about the things that we may have from our past that affect the way we believe so, Caitlin, since you've been here before, do you want to start out and let us know what your bias is when we talk about Americans who are leaving the church?

Caitlin Werth 02:39

Yeah, so Well, I'm American, you have that bias. And I am currently a pastor of a congregational church of a Presbyterian Church. So I have a bias of being in the church. And I will say that I have been in the church almost my entire life. So that is my other bias. I grew up in the church, I have almost without exception been a member of a church, I my only changes are that I grew up in mainline denomination, which means I guess we'll get into that a little bit later, but a Protestant tradition. And I became part of a Assemblies of God more charismatic kind of evangelical church during college, but then came back into the Presbyterian tradition. So my biases certainly being in the church.

Ray Abel 03:29

Perfect. And I think as we like to talk about definitions, and what would when you talk about charismatic, can you explain to people what that would be? Yeah, so

Caitlin Werth 03:39

I will have to say you might need to correct me if I'm saying it wrong. But typically, when I think of charismatic it is the type of Christianity that does some speaking in tongues is a lot of times with belief, believe very strong beliefs in the Holy Spirit. Sometimes in acts of through Acts that you see, like physically from the Holy Spirit,

Ray Abel 04:06

perfect. Well, I'm not going to correct you because I've never gone to a charismatic church, and I'm also a pastor. So I feel like I'm going to defer to you. So Michael, do you want to talk about what your biases are as we talk about leaving the church?

Michael Gungor 04:18

Sure. I love that you start with this question. By the way, it's a great way to start because we all come from somewhere and start even talking about my biases is like, there's so many all different sorts of ways. From my experience, you know, I've had beautiful experience within Christendom. And I've had horrible experiences within the Christian church. And I know that people use all the words and all the terms and all the practices in ways that help people and in ways that destroy and shame and abuse people. So I have the bias of of knowing that I am not going to I don't jump to any conclusions about what I don't have any absolute views of any of these things, I'm very fluid with all of it. So just know that my bias is like words or words to me, and their sounds that we make towards an intended purpose. And so I know that when I'm using my bias now where I'm at, I have a lot of compassion for people who are trying to be use their beliefs in a way that helps them but also have a lot of compassion for people who have been abused by the police. And the litigious thing, the litigious world that we have. So many people have been so hurt, that we're always trying to create space for like, not triggering people, but also giving. I like messiness about that my bias. There's no cleanness about it. And and I guess my own personal views, I see everything as one I see, I see clearly, there's only one being, there's only one thing going on, it's kind of the way I look at things. So that'd be my bias. When I say something like God, or the kingdom of God, I'm talking about the essence of what is and to me, that's unity.

Ray Abel 06:34

Love it. I'll go into my bias here very quickly. Unlike both of you, I did not grow up in the church. I went occasionally, with family every now and then I think I did was a Vacation Bible School, which, you know, we played games, and it was fun. And Caitlin and I actually met through a church in the Southside of Pittsburgh. And that was when I was 2425 years old, and a very quick version, as I had been wanting to kind of change my life. I was never a crazy person. But I was doing some things in my life where I was just like, this isn't what I want to do with life. And I was looking for something seeking. And I ended up dating a girl who brought me at our church, and I just I fell in love with it. And I ended up for about 10 years being very involved in the church, I worked for a Christian nonprofit, Caitlin, I did a trip to Mexico together to build a medical center. It was a very unique church that we went to was called hot metal bridge, faith community. And I mean, you had people who were homeless, next to doctors and lawyers. And there was a lot of sketches. I never did any acting before I met Caitlin, and

hot metal, but we did some acting together and on the stage. So it's a very unique experience. And I even ended up teaching Sunday school. But I haven't gone to church in about two years, I still have done a Bible study with two of my best friends, I still have faith. And there's not it hasn't been a big thing that just made me say don't go to church. I didn't have anything like what I've read about you, Michael. And I just kind of felt like I was going and wasn't getting a lot from the church itself. I was going I was teaching I was meeting with people. It was fun. But there was something missing, where I just felt like why am I going here when I could be doing this separately with you know, friends, and then just kind of drifted away a little bit in general, where it was listen, at least listening to messages every week doing Bible studies, things like that. And now it's still a faith as a big part of my life. I have faith but not from the traditional church perspective. Quick side note talking about church membership. I'm actually a member of like three churches now because when I when I had, I hadn't gotten to my last church for a while I went to two new churches just to explore what they were about. So I went through their membership classes telling them, hey, you know, I don't want to become a member, I just want to see what you're about. And they both signed me up at the same the same week. So I'm actually helping those 40% 7% numbers, you take me out of there. And that number drops a little bit because I'm a member of a bunch of churches by mistake. So that's my bias. And we're going to get into some questions here and some discussion. But before we do, we always also like to talk about definitions. And so I think it's interesting here, because we have two people who have what I think are different definitions of Christianity. So Caitlin, again, we'll start out with you. What is your definition of Christianity?

Caitlin Werth 09:19

Boy, you know, it's funny, you say you think we have different views? Ray, because I thought we might as well. But Michael, when you were talking at the beginning, I was thinking, Oh, that's really kind of what I feel as well, the importance of what what faith is to me is that recognition that we are all connected and that we're all connected to something that is greater. What I would say Christianity is is you, it depends on who you ask. And that is why it's so important that you ask this question, right? I think that it means something different to different people. What it means to me personally, is trying to follow my life in the way of Jesus Christ, and what it means to society. can look very different. You know, some churches would say, Well, to be a Christian, you have to have this specific set of beliefs. Some might say, to be a Christian, you need to be in relationship with Jesus, you know, for me, it is trying to, when I say I am a Christian, I want people to know that that means that I am following the way that Jesus put out. You know, Jesus came to the world not to start a church, but to start a new way of life. And so that, to me, is what Christianity is about trying to live in that life that that eliminates the divide between us and God.

Ray Abel 10:42

Love it. Alright, Michael, do you wanna give your definition of Christianity?

Michael Gungor 10:51

Yeah, I love that. That was beautiful. I would I would call Christianity like the traditions, the myths, the stories, the culture and practices done in the name of Christ, that have crude accrued through the millennia. Christianity, and I'm glad again, I love how you're starting both of these questions, because, yeah, we do have such different assumptions about what it means to me. I have not, we could say like,

if I've left the church, I haven't, in my perspective left. Christ, I haven't left and the mission or or invitation of Christ, I have left the power structures that have used the name of Christ to, to further and this is my perspective, to further their own egoic aims and power games.

Ray Abel 11:51

Yeah, and I think that's one of the things I do appreciate. And one of them I think, one of my first questions that I want to ask you, Mike, was, I appreciate the fact that you were public about your, your, your questions and your doubts, I think that's one thing, even in a church setting, you know, in a small group, when I'm with my best friends, we can kind of be open and talk about, hey, you know, we struggle with this. And this doesn't make sense. But when you're in kind of the group setting, it's a lot more difficult, because I feel like there's people who can either get angry if you're questioning or it doesn't provide an opportunity, if you ask someone you know, about a hard question with Christianity, and they just kind of regurgitate some things that are, you know, typical standard Christianese speak, it doesn't really help us kind of dive deeper. And I appreciate the fact that you were very public about where where you've struggled. And at one point, I mean, I don't want to speak for you, but it seems like you were outside of the church completely, and maybe an atheist, and then you kind of came, came back into understanding. There is a God. And, again, I don't want to speak for you. But the thing that I appreciate is the fact that you were open and having these tough conversations. And I think looking at Twitter, one of the things I've heard through the liturgist podcast is that there's been trauma and you leaving, and you felt a trauma from leaving the church. And I think that's a real thing. And what I'd like to ask you, though, is publicly when you look at Twitter, when you look at Facebook, it's kind of like the worst of humanity. And so you're going to get attacked, and people are going to maybe even think they're helping, they might be trying to say the things that lead you back to the Christian church building, but it's really an attack on you personally. The privately what was some of the response that you had? Were there people who were really backing you up? Was it still a microcosm of what we saw on Twitter? Where did you feel more love from a private perspective than you did from probably the the Christian general on Twitter and Facebook and public feed?

Michael Gungor 13:49

Yeah, there's definitely more love privately I feel and that's just my general experience with humans is that even the people that would be mean, on there, if you if they see your face, and they're talking to you in person, they're not gonna nobody's gonna 100% agree he's gonna look at you be like you're held down he doesn't need to repent but if they're see your face, because he's always have the human mechanisms that like, oh, wait, this is a human being. Right? We have when we we get to forget that we're human beings on social media. So yes, there and you know, I was I was a pastor when I really was an atheist. That's That's my atheist phase while I was a pastor, and there, but the people I and I remember I did this sermon where I basically told everybody like, I don't know that I kind of don't believe in God anymore right now and I don't know what to do with them. And people afterwards were really the the other pastor wasn't too happy about it, but but the people were like, Ah, I feel like that a lot of times too. So there was like a lot of grace from people face to face, but yeah, online. It's a different far less human.

Ray Abel 15:02

We've talked in the past about having a little, every time you have to post something on social media, there should be something that pops up that makes you wait for 10 seconds like a delay. And do you really want to send this do you? And then I think what we should add, though to that is maybe have a picture of the person with their face their face, they're like, do you really want to attack this person? So

Caitlin Werth 15:20

yeah, right. Right. I had that along those lines. Just real quick, I had a great, great advice from friend ones that some of the best ways to confront negative comments said directly to you is to just say what, because so often, people will not even repeat the thing that they say, like, because you, you know, have to think about it, and

Ray Abel 15:44

love it. Yeah. Now, how do you feel though, because I know, I mean, Twitter and Facebook. And just I mean, I'm sure and even even when you're talking about people being supportive, I feel like I could understand if, as I posted the site's kind of a funny story when I posted the link to my Facebook page, and the caption initially, was leaving the church, and that's what we were going to talk about. But I had to change it to Why are Americans leaving the church because my inbox got hit with a bunch of people talking about my salvation, because they saw leaving the church, and they thought that I was talking about leaving the church and I, it wasn't, I didn't see anyone attacking me. But it was definitely like, we need to save Ray. And I was like, oh, man, and I had to actually update the post and put in the little brackets there. By the way, I'm not leaving a church. And the next version of it said, you know why Americans are leaving the church. But I think that's the thing I've seen in church settings. Are there a lot of people who, to me, don't have a malicious intent, but come across that way. So I'd be interested in hearing more when you talk about the trauma you faced from it. You know, I hear people oftentimes, well, I'll pray for you, or it's gossip in the form of praying for you. So it's like, well, you know, Michael, I think you should pray for Caitlin because you know, she's doing these things that are really terrible. So if you could just pray for and it just a way of saying, hey, Caitlin's doing this thing, let me bring it up to the surface. But at the core of it, do you feel like those people who were coming at you maybe hard to say, hey, you know, stay away from that? Do you think they were Do you think people actually had malicious intent? Or do you think they were genuinely concerned or somewhere in between?

Michael Gungor 17:17

I think malicious intent is such a rarity in the world. I think almost everybody thinks they're doing what's right. And they're doing what they're trying to do to survive and to help and, and it just, but they get triggered, their fears get triggered. Like I read this book recently called Denial of Death, The Denial of Death, and it was talking about how we sort of the core ego function is to stand out in in in the universe and be special and be like cosmically significant. And when we see that, we can't do that, as we're kids, like, we feel like we figure out, I can't actually stand out as very cosmically significant. I've got this mortal body that is going to die. And that needs food. And, you know, he gets dirty and poops and all this stuff. And it's embarrassing. And so we plug into something bigger, like the egos, I need a group that I can find some more significance in. And so that's how we avoid some of our fear of death. And how we deal with it, is by joining this thing that's bigger than us. And so I see now, why at first, I didn't understand like, Why do my questions threaten you? Why do my decisions about my faith? Why do you care? Like, it doesn't make any sense? It didn't make any sense to me. But I can see like, when, if

those questions are the things you don't want to ask? Because that threatens your sense of belonging, that threatens your sense of safety, because this is the tribe that you've connected with. And this is how you feel cosmically significant, then your questions, really do threaten me. And so I kind of see more where people have a little bit more grace for it now than I used to. I don't I still think like, we can be better than that. But it makes more sense.

Caitlin Werth 19:00

That's interesting, Michael, that what you said about it's almost as if I'm hearing you say that you're giving voice to what's not being spoken about and that's threatening to people, right. So in some ways, I wonder and I, I had this question before even met today, but I don't know all the parts of your story. So I don't know what the churches you were a part of were like, but was doubt always something that could it be talked about? I mean, like the because the fact that you as a pastor shared that and it was a big deal. is not something in my upbringing. That would be a big deal, I doubt is something that's a big part of what we call the mainline Christianity, which is like we're reformed, reformed Presbyterianism, but I wonder if that's so it's more taboo in the tradition you came from?

Michael Gungor 19:56

Yeah, I think so. Yeah, it was it was pretty taboo. And I think that's kind of a hallmark of, of all. fundamentalisms is like, if you're not allowed to ask the questions and doubt it, you're probably dealing with some sort of fundamentalism. So yeah, I think, had I had a more affirmative context for doubt that if doubt comes up, and if that was celebrated, like, Ooh, look at your gut questions, you're thinking, good job. I bet that would have relieved some of the trauma, the trauma was, I guess, I don't know if I really answered your question that very well, right. But that the the trauma aspect of it was kind of the loss of relationship, the loss of belonging. And now, again, the work I'm doing now personally, in therapy and stuff is really having strong enough emotional boundaries to see that the people that think I'm a heretic, the people that don't still don't want to talk to me from my past, because they think I'm crazy police, like, I don't have to, like, let that in Emotionally, I can, I can still love them. And some of that trauma can be dealt with in me. And that's not to justify or put this off on somebody else that they should do this as well. I'm just saying, for me, the more I own my own experience, in that, it also kind of helps heal, the trauma of people are trying to be okay. And like they're trying to believe that they're trying to believe in what I have to say is threatening to their systems. So I get why they're a little nervous about me, but what can I do, to not like shut them out of my heart, to give them freedom to believe and have have their own thing without, without it being so traumatic? To me, that makes me

Caitlin Werth 21:57

that is, so I'm sorry, I keep interrupting, right. But that is so gracious. I mean, that is that is honestly to me, like as a pastor, that's just the picture of grace and what we should be, as are communities of faith, you know, the way that you are acting to those who have caused you pain, though you don't believe it's intentional, and they're dealing with their own stuff like to be able to exist in spaces and life together, where we can offer each other that kind of grace. I mean, that is what I think the church is meant to look like.

Ray Abel 22:26

I think that's something we've talked about a lot in the show is that there's always gray area, and we tend to look at things so black and white, and when you're talking about questioning, and that being something that's off limits, I mean, that if you look at that, from a worldly perspective, without Christianity, I mean, if you if you question anything about science, we're not going to get into climate change here. But if you question it, that you're you're anti science, and you're you're just you don't believe it? And it's no, we actually have some questions. I want to know what I'm believing. And I think that's one of the things I really appreciate what I've done in small groups from a Christianity perspective is I can talk to my friends and say, hey, you know what, this doesn't really make sense to me. And, you know, this, this part here of the Bible, like what I think one of the things you talk about in the liturgist podcast is, I think, the whole point of Christ being put on the cross and killed his child abuse and a way if you if you look at it from a lot of the standard teachings, where God put him on the cross and killed him, if you look at it from that perspective, the way a lot of churches teaches, it's kind of like, and I heard that I thought my gut reaction was that cognitive dissonance, which is like, alright, it's something outside of my comfort zone. I'm pushing that away. But then I thought about anyone. Well, wait a second. I think there's a point there that that should be heard. And I think that that's something that I've never thought of it that way before. But it opened my eyes to start thinking more deeply about it. And I feel like that's what builds true faith, or at least you're away from something. But I think that if you're just only listening to the people around you, and you can't, the traditions, and you can't ask questions, you can't challenge things we've learned a lot in the last 2000 years since Christ was walking the earth. And I think it's okay to, to question why some of these things that were, I think, if you look at the words of Christ, I think they were all pretty amazing. And I'm in the same pages I think both of you guys were, I think the Christ, the person is an amazing human being. When you start looking at how the theology around it has gone, though, those were formed off and hundreds of years later, 1000s of years later, and some points and now we are taking that as fact, because we've been taught in the church but never questioned. Oh, is it really if God didn't I've heard a lot at church if God didn't die in the cross then become resurrected. Christianity means nothing. It's like, well, wait a second. Why does it mean nothing? I think there's a lot to be learned from Christianity. If even if that didn't happen, maybe it was just a story. So with that being said, I think there's rarely black and white. And I feel like there's always this area of gray. So I think that's an interesting point to come back to. And I think that when you talk about some of the problems you've seen in churches, or maybe you think back to some of the problems you've seen in churches, I think we tend to say, a lot of people outside of the church will be like all Christians, you know, hate women's rights and are patriarchal and, and only care about their guns and Jesus. And that's it. And I think that's a misconception. And I think that when we talk about the problems that maybe you've seen in a church, what was the big one that led you out of your, your belief and going back to where you were pastoring a church and saying, I can't do this anymore, specifically with kind of your experience at that church, not the whole generalization of how bad Christianity can be.

Michael Gungor 25:53

I didn't have it. I mean, that church, we moved, we moved states and we actually did try to find a church when we got to LA for a little while. But I think the reason that I don't continue church shopping at this point it's I just, I think, the I feel like the technologies that we've been using that word in our podcast this season, a lot of like, if you see all this Christian stuff, the traditions and the stories, the scriptures and practices, as technologies as as things as things that we're utilizing, to live in a different kind of way. And I think I love how Caitlyn talked about the way being that which like, removes that sense of

separateness from God. If these technologies are useful or not, is a question that I asked like, and for me, I've noticed that different technologies have been useful at different points of my life, like certain kinds of prayer were really important at this point, and then they weren't so important, then certain kinds of meditation were really important for this season. And then I kind of lost I didn't need to do that anymore. And so for me, the technology of going to a place that we call church, in a room where we're all sitting and listening to someone tell me their thoughts about the Bible, kind of lost efficacy for me, it just didn't do much for me. And so it's not that it wasn't for me such it wasn't like necessarily a huge act of protest or anything. It just wasn't really doing anything for me. Hmm.

Ray Abel 27:36

Caitlyn, do you ever as a pastor, do you ever have those days currently?

Caitlin Werth 27:41

Those days meaning when the technologies aren't doing stuff? For me the question, I think

Ray Abel 27:47

oftentimes when we look at pastors, we just think that you have to be holy 100% of the time, and you never have doubts or struggles or other things that can play. You don't talk about all I know you have a church to watch out for to shepherd here. So I don't want you to go into all of your deepest, darkest secrets. But other days, well,

Caitlin Werth 28:04

listen, that this is a great thing. And I'm not just saying this, because I'm on here, but truly at the church, I'm part of it is such a gift and that people would be completely okay with my being honest, which is just great. I mean, I'm a human, and they do you know that I am not perfect. Actually, the tagline for our church is imperfect people serving a perfect God. So you know, we know. But yeah, join my clergy group to join the conversations in my house. My husband's a pastor, too, we are not, not what you might think. So yes, there are certainly times for that. And I would say I don't I the word journey makes sense. But I don't always love the term journey for faith, because it seems like you're heading to a destination. It's almost more like a wandering eye, like better or a circle of some kind. Because we change, you know, we go through shifts, and we go through different times in our Faith Journeys, particularly if we're people that are seeking and, and I will say, going back to what you had said earlier, Ray about people still identify as Christian, but aren't going to churches. I 100% agree with you that people are still seeking. And for me, whether it's Christianity or another face, that's irrelevant, because again, it's really about finding God. And I think that we find God in a lot of different different ways. Also, I'm not looking to make people Christians, you know, I want people to be able to connect with God. But I think that part of what happens is that are really like a word, Michael, I'm going to use this now. But the those technologies, those those things, do start to lose some effectiveness and individually, but then I think also, corporately, you know, that's why churches, Change Styles. You have these movements, and really historically, from the beginning of when churches were formed, the pattern is movement. institution to movement institution, there comes a point where the institution is broken, you know, and that was a big part of the Reformation was this is not working. And it kind of leads into a movement. And there have been lots of movements all the time. And I think that we're kind of in that stage right now, I think people are starting to see where institutions are not fitting the way people are

our program these days, the way that people are engaging in life these days. And so you'll, you're seeing a lot more of emergence of like in the Presbyterian Church, we have what's called 1001, new worshiping communities. And these are anything from like a running group that also engages in faith, you know, to people that meet up at bars on Friday nights to talk about faith and consider themselves a worshiping community, because Christ is the center of that for them. But it really looks so very different. And so yes, I don't remember your question was, yes, I have those moments. Because I think that is who we are, as people to have those moments. And I think it's part of as a pastor, it is important to have those moments and to talk about them. Because as a church, as a leader of an institutional church, we need to be thinking all the time. Where what is God calling us to be right now? You know, what are the things we do need to tear down? And what are the things that we need to build up?

Ray Abel 31:25

Yeah. And I think that's one of the things where when you look through church membership by generation, the same Gallup poll, I'd actually didn't know this term. If you were born before 1946. You're a traditionalist? Did you guys know that term? Have you heard that before? Never heard them? Yes. That number of percentage of people who are members of church, even that group went from 77 to 66%, but still 66% Baby Boomers, 46 to 64, were at 58%, Gen X 65 to 80, or 50%, and millennials who are born 1981 to 1996. That number is at 36%. So when you're talking about finding new ways, to bring people into the church and finding new ways to reach people, it's clearly going down with each generation. And those numbers are buoyed by the older generation. I think that's one of the things going back to you, Michael. In the episode you were unlettered, just about when you kind of launched this new new program you're doing. And he talked about his Christianity worth saving? He had four points, I believe. And one of them. I think he said it really well. He said the foundation has been laid by our ancestors with Christianity and with faith and we couldn't start from scratch. And could you kind of talk about that, because I think even taking this aside from the talking about specifically Christian faith, a lot of times we talk about morality, and a lot of our morality. I mean, we are at the core, we're still a Christian nation, our laws, our money, everything about our country was not everything. But most things were founded based on Christian tradition. And so a lot of our morality, a lot of our justice comes from what we were learned from the Bible. And so if we get rid of that, that's one question I always have for people who are atheists or want to get rid of religion. It's like, well, where does that morality come from? And how do we kind of set that line? And I'm not sure if that's what you were talking about. But I think that was an interesting subject. That was one of the reasons why Christianity is worth saving is that that foundation has been laid, and we couldn't start from scratch. And I just like to hear you talk a little bit more about what you meant by that.

Michael Gungor 33:34

Yeah, thank you. I mean, the morality piece. I used to, like be afraid before, before I let go of my beliefs, that was one of the big like, oh, no, I can't let go of my beliefs, because then what would happen to morality because my, in my mind, my ethic was built on my belief in God. What I noticed when I let go of belief, was my desire for good for my neighbor did not change in the slightest, if anything, it increased because I had less I had more RAM, to not be worrying about the Odyssey problem of evil or like, all this, like abstract thoughts. And I was like, well, here's this person, why I don't my natural state as a human being, is compassion. I think that's a natural aspect of these organisms. That when we're not all caught up in our thoughts about what they should be or what they should be, but the natural

state is like, oh, hello fellow human being we are connected and I think that it's like that's a natural thing. So I'm not so concerned about like, what would happen morality if we got rid of Christian practices, but I am, I do notice that the language the traditions, the myths that that frame our entire civilization, are so in like, if I if we retry to rename the The the mystery that that undergirds all of existence. Other than garbage, we're like, call it Billy Bob blow. And and we really try to start get that going on. Can we get that on our money in Billy Bob? Oh, we live in, like, it's not gonna work it's like, and why what's the point, it's just another word is like. So we already have language, we already have a whole set of meaning making mechanisms and stories and myths and traditions, we're not going to have, we're not going to be able to come up with another garden of Eden story that that exists everywhere, that has all that every piece of literature has some sort of like, connection to. We are in this one, we are in Christendom, or post Christian dome or wherever, whatever you want to call it. It's not. So everybody's heard of God. Everybody's heard of Jesus. In our, in our society, or those things was so funny. When I was an Evangelical, we're always gonna make the name of Jesus more famous. It's pretty famous already. Our calendar is built. Right, right. 2021

Caitlin Werth 36:15

This is really way off there. So apologies. But this reminds me of a College Humor skit I just saw about marketing Oreos, and the CEO of Oreos was like, what what are we doing here? People? Can you honestly, do you believe there's here? Who has not had an Oreo?

Michael Gungor 36:35

Right, right. Yeah. Oreos more famous.

Ray Abel 36:40

That's the actual name. That's what I should have this episode than I wouldn't have had all those crazy inboxes. So there's your take? I think I think that's something Caitlyn, I talked about. We did an episode we talked about prison reform. And Michael, you may not know this, but Caitlin actually worked in prison for what was it eight years, 10 years, Caitlin? Eight years as a chaplain and we had a really good discussion about prison reform and why we should why we should do that. But it comes back and Caitlin I have talked about this off air. Compassion is something that we should all have and I think that's the thing that gets gets me worried and and not not about if we lose Christianity, will people have compassion, but people in general, I think when you look at social media, again, I'm going to go back to that social media and the way people are just, they jumped to conclusions, they have this attack mentality. There is no personal connection there. And it scares me because I'm like, is this really like, what humanity has become, but I don't see those people in real life. And I think that's what we need to start focusing on. And I I unfortunately, don't have the willpower to get rid of Twitter and Facebook, but every part of me wants to get rid of them. Because it's, it's assessable. And I just I look at that, and I think, wow, people really like this. But in person, I really the amount of people that I meet that are terrible people is so rare. And Caitlyn and I have a little different perspective on what happens when people get out of jail. I think that people should be given a second chance and I have compassion no matter what their situation was. But I think there's a level of crimes where you know, we kind of go okay, well murder for me is like, okay, maybe that's something separate but you know, you have more grace for everyone, but I think that's what I found from people I've talked to on the show people I've talked to in my personal life, the amount of compassion and grace people have for other people is

amazing. And I think that's what we need to focus on more and I think that with that being said, well how do you see that working when you talk about fixing Christianity or saving Christianity? How do you kind of bring in those traditions that you've talked about and some of the the groundwork that's been laid? But change it where it's more focused on what is it that you're focusing on? I guess that's the thing is it focusing on personal compassion? Is it focusing on the words of Christ what is it that you can save by Christianity moving forward and say hey, this is what we should be doing in the new Oreo Christianity I just made that term up. Oreo Christianity

Michael Gungor 39:08

that question was for me yep, yep, yes. Okay. Um yeah, in saving Christianity that's a it's kind of a funny thing, because I really don't have any interest in saving the the power structures, or the really anything specifically about it. But I do have an interest in like Caitlyn said, the mission of of that I hear in the in the parables of Jesus, leaving the 99 sheep to find the one to find the last coin, the the kingdom of God recognizing the kingdom of God within and letting that sprout and bloom into a world that is more peaceful and just and loving and, and a life that is more fully human. And I so in that, in service of that, and I think that that is like part of the part of the issue with the church as it is, currently is, I don't know that we have a clear idea of where we're going, like, what, what we're trying to do, like, we, when I was a kid, the church had, my church had a little bit more solid idea where we were trying to save people from hell. And, like, if that's the thing, if we're gonna get tried to get everybody to believe this message so that they don't go to hell, when they die, you at least have a common purpose. And you're like, well, all this serves a purpose. And in that purpose, you don't really need things like art, you don't really need things like compassion, you know, justice and compassion and whatever. It's all like, Okay, if it serves that purpose, fine, we'll find a little place you can, you can have a little artists table over in the corner. But that was the that was the center of it. But then, when I got more progressive, and didn't believe in Hell anymore, then it was like, Oh, well, then what's our purpose? Now we're making the world heaven. We're trying to make the outer world heaven. Outside of me, we're sort of trying to fix things. We're trying to get it to be more just more equitable. But then that's so vague. Because what's the measuring stick of that? And when when have we arrived? And so then it was, it's harder in that space? And I think a lot of people have moved into that more of that kind of space from church like was they've given up some of the more destructive beliefs about literal like lakes of fire for eternity? Like, what are we doing here? And so for me, the question of what are we doing together? And what's the point of the technologies and, like kitten, you were talking about not having a journey to a place? I agree with that to the point that like, if it's some other place, if it's like, so I go here, when I die, or so that things look exactly like this, I don't have that journey, either. But but for me, that the end, the point of the journey is this moment, the point, the end of the journey, is this very moment of like, how am I experiencing my life? How am I seeing and experiencing this moment with my hands open? And looking at the people that are right in front of me with open heart, and with love and compassion? Or am I holding myself back in and resisting life as it is in this moment. And so if the technologies can be used, and I think that's what Jesus was after, I think that's what he was talking about. So to me, it's not even like rescuing Christianity, as much as it is like actually listening to what Jesus was saying, and and utilizing some of the things that are there that are already part of our lexicon, and already part of our practices that effectively, and to me, effectively meaning like, how can they make us be more fully alive in this moment, with each other, more fully embodied, more full of love more full of life, the fruit of the Spirit, as opposed to making it a system of beliefs about something in the past that happened, God

did this with Jesus, so that in the future, something else can happen. I can go here, when I die, or the future, the world can look like this. But instead, making all of it a technology to serve this moment, changes it pretty drastically to me, but it makes it it actually turns it from being escapist. And avoidant, and potentially even abusive, to actually be helpful and beautiful.

Ray Abel 43:41

I, when you were talking about what's the point, I think I experienced some of that when I volunteered for a nonprofit in Pittsburgh, there was a Christian nonprofit. And I remember I was teaching basketball, coaching basketball. And I was working with these kids who were elementary school kids. And I remember the first time they had a big focus on prayers of salvation. And if you haven't been part of a church, if you say a prayer, asking God to forgive your sins, then you're some people believe that you're just you go to heaven, that's all you need. And that's the goal is to get that prayer of salvation read. And I do remember, we had the first call to salvation, where you just ask a bunch of kids and say, Hey, who wants to who wants to accept Jesus as a savior? And I remember seeing one of my kids who was one of my worst kids in basketball, say that, and it actually got me I was like, wow, like, that's really impactful. And man, like, that's a big change he's making and maybe it'll be like me, like, I came to church, and all of a sudden, my life started turning around, and it wasn't perfect, but it was moving in a good direction. And then I saw that kid do that same prayer of salvation, probably five to six other times, because he didn't really know what he was doing. He just raised his hand when people were asking him to do this prayer. And that was kind of a big focus on the whole organization was this is how many kids have been saved this year. And this is how many kids have said this prayer. And that was always weird to me because it was like, Well, I think we do a lot of good things. I ended up working for them. I was there for a long time. There are a lot of really big, impactful changes that happen in these kids lives. But I think the least of that was saying that rare but it became such a focus because it was a great marketing tool where I was like, Listen, you know, come on, you can donate to us, because we saved 2000 Kids became this, like, talking point. And it was like, Yeah, but you probably kind of saved that same time, you know? Yeah. And so I think that's one of those things, where it's like, what, what is the mission? What is the passion? What's the purpose? And I think that was my question to you. Caitlin is, as a pastor and someone who's still in the church here, what do you think the purpose of the churches and even if it's not the the broader church overall, what is the purpose that you found? The Why are you a pastor? What is your purpose in leading a church?

Caitlin Werth 45:47

I'm going to try really hard to be succinct here, which is not always, always my gift, or the gift of many pastors. But there's so there's so much to say. Very simply, that this is very true is I believe that our goal, as a church in the world, is to be a place that shows the love of God. And that is very simple. And that can mean a million things. And what is unfortunate about that, and why I think the church gets into trouble is for some churches, showing the love of God means keeping people from hell, for other churches, showing the love of God means picketing at abortion clinics, you know, for some people, neither of which are what I believe is showing the love of God. So that's where it gets very complicated. But for me, this is not exactly what you asked Ray, but I think it ties in the reason that I stay in the church, because I will tell you, Michael, I mean, I relate so much to so much of what you are saying and I, probably the past 10 to 15 years of my life, I've been drawn a lot more to the inner journey of faith and what you know, God does within us, and how we get tuned to the world and the universe and each

other and all those things. But why I continue to stay and try my best to lead others in a communal faith is that I think there is something that happens when people of faith come together. I think there's something that happens when people come together in general. And to be honest, I mean, I think all people are spiritual, that so this, you know, applies in lots of ways. But when it comes with some intentionality of like, let's connect with our faith, there's a third thing that comes about and that comes in life, right? Like the you and the me make this us that is a third thing that's different from me and different from you. But for me, when it's connected to that spiritual force, when it's connected to God, it's even more powerful. And I just a quick story to kind of highlight that. My husband's church this morning, he is doing live streaming still at their church, as is mine. And so he's in a room with a few people preaching to a mic, which is the absolute worst version of church that there can possibly, I mean, we're at right now, particularly, because what you're saying, like like being in a room and hearing somebody talk about their thoughts of God, hopefully, ideally, in most churches, there's more things going on. But sitting in front of a TV watching somebody talk, it's even worse, so. But they have basically, so it was just a few people. But they've had a guy that's sort of walked in each time, a few times here and said, like, can I just join you what's going on? Well, we're live streaming, but if you want to sit and listen, fine. It was a different guy today. And my husband was not feeling very well yesterday. So he said, boy, my sermons going to be terrible tomorrow, you know, just not not heavy on content. This guy came in and he had all these things he was talking about and shared all these things with my husband. And and the core of it was, he's been alone for 40 years, you know, like, that was the core of his message. And my husband shared his sermon. And afterwards, the guy was like, wow, that was all the things I was just talking about with you. His intern said, well, that sermon was for that guy, huh? And he's like, you know, I don't know, I don't know what happened here. Right. But there's something that happened. I don't choose to call that coincidence. I also don't say like, God picked up this man and put him in this place, you know, to hear this thing but I think that when people are gathering seeking to gather that spiritual force that God is doing something in those movements, so to me, whether that is through a group of people meditating made it meditating together, studying the Word together, reading poetry together and talking about how that moves their soul, you know, I think it can, church can look so many different ways. But I think that the the gathering is an important piece of that.

Michael Gungor 49:49

Can I jump in?

Ray Abel 49:49

Yep. Good. All right.

Michael Gungor 49:51

I love that and I agree with it completely. I love the I did a lot of practice. Within Buddhist and Hindu traditions, after leaving Christian tradition for a little while, it was actually through those traditions that I kind of remained friends with the Christian tradition. Hearing kind of the stories from, from a different lens, and like, oh, wow, and finding the commonalities. And Sangha, and a spiritual community is important for all religions. And I think there is something powerful about I mean, Jesus said, like, two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there, there's something about the kind of connection and consciousness that when we taste those moments of spiritual like, when, whenever it's working, right, whenever, like, the, the cookies in the lobby, and everyone's connecting, and there's this, ah, this life

that's happening or in the middle of a worship service, and everybody's speaking in tongues, and nod hits the thing, what, whatever, whatever is working, the juice, the presence, the the anointing, we call it what you will, salvation born again, the moment that's alive and buzzing with spirit that's live and buzzing with God and in life. I think that amplifies and is more readily accessible. When we come together to do something, it's easy. It's, there's more juice to find when we come together, than if we're all just locked away in our own isolated households and lives. And so I totally agree that there's something powerful and profound about the gathered Body of Christ.

Ray Abel 51:40

So how do you guys see, and we'll say, 30 years from now, and the US church, if it continues at the current rate is at about nine or minus 20% Christianity or minus 40%? People who go to church? What does that church look like to you? And I'm going to start out with you, Caitlin. But what does that look like in 2030 years? Now, if you could design an ideal church experience for people? What would change or what would be different from today?

Caitlin Werth 52:07

Oh, boy, I don't like to predict the future. I do think that shared life needs to be a part of whatever the church looks like. And I don't mean just coming together for potlucks or coming together on Sundays for worship. I mean, going back to that early church, where the people who are worshipping together are also people who whose lives are more deeply intertwined, you know, people who are on a daily basis connected to these people that they have committed to being that local, you know, Body of Christ and, and welcoming and others and you know, living still amongst all the all your neighbors and in that way that shows compassion, but that it's not a thing you go to, you know, the church is not a thing you go to or that you're a part of, but that it is part of what that those daily rhythms are

Ray Abel 53:14

like. And Michael, I know you were talking about it, maybe give us an update. I know you're looking at potentially doing a nonprofit and starting to work through that process. But what's kind of I know, there's been a shift with the liturgist podcast, it's more of, I don't want to say it's a movement because I don't want to put words in your mouth, but tell me what the future of the liturgist podcast is, and how that might come outside of the podcasts space into the world.

Michael Gungor 53:41

Yeah, well, I mean, in a way, I kind of see the litigious as a technology company to bring that that word back, as there's all these technologies that are maybe made for like, old, you know, flip phones that haven't made their way over the technologies for a lot of us that are have been used and steeped in patriarchy and white supremacy and, and power systems for control and fear and shame, have become completely useless technologies, technologies, like maybe communion or gathering as a church or whatever the specific practices, words language. Well, for a lot of us, we've just dismissed the whole thing. And what I've discovered, like I briefly mentioned through my journeys through different traditions and religions and stuff is like, there's actually some really powerful technology if we just use it. You know, a hammer is a great technology for hammering nails. It's not for eating soup. It's a bad technology and and maybe the words and teachings of Christ are a helpful technology for being more loving and connected to each In this moment and connected to our lives, and maybe they're a really

bad technology for creating in and out groups of people, and you know, like just misusing it. So I'm interested in curating, creating, rediscovering spiritual technologies that could be used by whoever, individuals, groups. That's kind of what we're doing with a litigious and so we're mining Christianity right now of like what's useful here. And at this point, and we use the word non dual, which means, basically, I think so much religion has been identity based, it's been belief based. And it's been based in groups of us and them. And here's how you belong to us, you believe these things you like this. And what I love and the idea of imagining a future, practice spirituality, I love the idea of people, utilizing the practices that have been handed down through the millennia, utilizing whatever that work for them. So that we're not making up. You don't have to make up everything from scratch, like we talked about earlier. But that have that are so clearly laid out. Like, here's what, here's what this technology is for. Here's how it's used, that we can actually have spiritually spirituality practiced, with people gathering, that's not identity or belief based, but more intention based, like love, and connection in this moment. We're here to experience life together. I think that sort of intention where it's not like I'm here, because I'm part of this team. But it's here because I want to experience love in life. I think it opens up just a crazy amount of new liturgical experiences. I think so much of Christianity has been sex Shamy I think it's been not embodied. I think it's been up in our heads, I think it's been about fear and shame. And if we actually shifted what we're trying to do the end result, and we got clear about what we're after. Liturgy, church, gathering technologies, can all spiritual technologies of all these sorts can be so profound, and actually amplify our our love and connection and life

Ray Abel 57:24

will have it. Well, I want to talk about I mean, I think we already did kind of cover what's next here, but we always like to wrap up with what's next, what did anyone learn, and I'm going to start out with something here. I'm also going to say that I appreciate you both being on the show. And we kind of talked about this before we went on air. But when I mentioned in the intro, that there are people who stay in the church and try to fix things, and there's people who leave the church and and try to fix things. I think that's an example that both of you are providing. And I'm glad you let me be part of this discussion. Because I'm outside of the church right now. I'm not doing much to fix it. So you two are actually doing God's work in my mind where I'm I'm outside of that. So whatever you believe that God is, I feel like you're doing those those things and trying to move us forward. And I appreciate that. I think what you're

Michael Gungor 58:09

doing God's work, Ray,

Caitlin Werth 58:11

I know, I was gonna say the same. I mean, I just want to affirm that, well, for this, and for this podcast, specifically, because people are people are separating because of ideas and beliefs. And you are bringing people to the table and together Yes, that is God's work.

Ray Abel 58:28

I appreciate that. That's actually kind of that's a great lead in to what I wanted to talk about here is that one of the things you said earlier, Michael was the natural state of humans is compassion. And that's the thing that just keeps me going because I get so frustrated about so many things with society at this

point. And I always try to come across as calm and rational and reasoned on the show. But when you look at the words of Jesus, I think one thing that I think all of us can agree on. And I think that if you talk to anyone in general, people agree that what Jesus taught is pretty good. I mean, it's good stuff, whether you believe in the divinity or not. But that's the main thing to me. What he taught is compassion. And that's something that I actually see in both of you. And it's real, and it's honest, but the nice thing is, I don't think you guys are the exception. And I think that's the great part is that the people who are openly racist and even I think in a lot of cases there's ignorance to it. And I we're not going to talk about the morality of abortion, but I think when you brought up abortion clinics and picketing Caitlyn, that's something where when I look at that, I think that's a terrible way to try to get someone to change their mind. And I think no one no real change is ever came from ridicule. But if you look at the intentions of people, it's not bad. And if you think if you look at the intentions of anyone that's going through that they're not if you're thinking about abortion, it's not because while I want to kill a baby, thinking about trying to stop someone from having an abortion, it's not because while I hate women, and I want them to have less rights, it's I want to say have a baby. And I think the intentions are good. And I think even when you talk about Christianity, there's obviously the people who pick it. But there are things that aren't really focused on I actually helped on a board just as a volunteer basis for a group that they didn't shame people, the board actually had a lot of people who had went through abortions, and there's some real long term lasting effects that I didn't know about is a man who has never gone through that. But women who have abortions, there's a lot of, you know, personal pain that that causes whether they wanted to or thought it was the right decision or not, that often follows. And so they were trying to provide support for young mothers, they were trying to help out people who went through abortions. And that's the kind of stuff that I don't think it's the press. But that's the kind of people that I see in the church often. And whether you're in the church and doing the work, or whether you're outside the church and doing the work. I think compassion is the key. And I think that's what I think that's what we need to focus on. And, you know, we've talked about Mr. Rogers in the show before and I think that that's the the closest we've had on this earth since Jesus to someone who lived like that someone who had that kind of compassion and that love for people. And it's such a gentle soul. And unfortunately, I mean, I, I know, I don't always have that gentle soul, but that's what I'm trying to get to. And I, I appreciate hearing people like you who maybe are in different views of what the church is, I think there's a lot of similarities there. But at the core of it, both of you, the big thing you've talked about is compassion. And that is what I think Jesus taught. And that's what I think most people are all about. And I hope that that's what we can do through this show, and just in our lives, is to open the eyes of looking at the hearts of people and trying to show that love instead of hate. So for me, that's what's next, show more compassion. Be more like Jesus, Mr. Rogers, and Caitlin and Michael. So I feel like it's a little love fest here at the end. But Caitlin, what's what's something you learned? Or what's next for you?

Caitlin Werth 1:01:54

Hmm, I learned a lot. I really appreciated your perspective, Michael, on a lot of things. As Ray said, I don't think we're actually far off from each other in terms of a lot of thoughts. But I will say, What, what's next, what's next, it's we have a statement within our church that is continuously recreating a welcoming environment. And when you were talking Michael about wanting to have those liturgical practices, or you call it the somethings technologies, I think of them as disciplines or practices or whatever. That idea is what I hope to do like to continue to read it redefined to redevelop to recreate not

starting from scratch, as you said, but how can we make our lives and make our practices of life provide those opportunities for people to feel those connections? So I think you've inspired me a little bit in the wording of that, but that is what I hope I can make sure I'm focusing on

Ray Abel 1:03:11

perfect anything you want to wrap up with Michael.

Michael Gungor 1:03:16

Oh, it's just been encouraging and inspiring to me to, to hear all of us coming from different places, but but the it's almost like the essence of what we're all trying to do. Which is I've heard my friend Pete's been saying like, we just don't want all this to be together, right? Like, like everything that we're doing are just like an excuse to be together. And, and there's like this, it's the it's, I think that's love, I think it's the draw to you see this down to it, like atomic level of like, this particle being attracted to this particle like gravity. Yeah, come here and want to go there. And it's all just moving towards itself. And still kind of feeling the love. That's beneath each one of these different perspectives and different angles. We're all trying to go how do we how do we move towards each other? How do we, how do we move towards our life and towards our source and, and not be so distance and divided and disconnected from each other? And so feeling that was really beautiful. That's great.

Ray Abel 1:04:30

I love it. I think that's, um, I'll wrap up with saying that one of my favorite parts about doing the podcast so if I realized that I actually I don't know if you've ever watched the show, Always Sunny in Philadelphia. It's a terrible, I love that. I look terrible, but I love it. I love it so much. And there's one part where they're trying to get everyone together and they said, we don't really have a deep bench and it's because they've offended everyone and got everyone. But one of the things I've loved and we always wrap up with one good thing and I I'm actually gonna just take the one good thing this week because one of the things I've loved as Caitlin and I haven't talked in probably what, six, seven years before the podcast started. Now, this is your second show. I'd never met you before, Michael. Now we've had a great conversation. And I feel like we are at some level friendship here. And I look back and I feel like I have a deep bench because I've brought people on the show that are from my personal life, that I just really appreciate them. And we've rekindled those friendships that I've missed. And I think especially with everything that's happening with the lockdowns, it's tough to have those connections. And tomorrow, I'm actually meeting up with one of the kids that I worked with at the nonprofit that he's in college now about to go to law school, which makes me feel really old, but we haven't seen in a few years, and I've reached out to him because I feel like that I'm missing that community. And that, that friendship. And I think that that's one of the side notes from everything that's happened through the pandemic is that we're all we have for interaction is social media. And that's where we see the worst of people. And as Andrew said, in our show a few weeks ago, it's so weird, because now nowadays, when you first meet someone, it's not that you get to know them, and then find hang out with them some time and find out if your French friends, you become friends on Facebook, and then you see their worst opinions that they could potentially ever have hosted for the world to see. And you see the worst of them. But I think that's what we've been seeing a lot of. And I think that's important that we it's been a tough time, both being out of that community and out of communion with people in general. But it's also been something where it's been self aggravating because I I've kind of enjoyed some of the solitude but

it's so good to be able to talk with people like you, and people that I completely disagree with. And that's what I'll wrap up with. A couple weeks ago, we talked with a gender studies professor, about transgender athletes and unpaper we would seem completely different. I mentioned this last week, but we're actually going to go shooting guns together. She's never shot a gun before and we're gonna go shooting and she's gonna experience it. And, you know, we I think I, I would call her friend at this point, I don't know should call me a friend, but I really enjoy her and outside of this kind of conversation we never would have met. And I think that's what we need moving forward. And that's what I've that one good thing for me is being able to reconnect with old friends, new friends like Michael. And I just appreciate you guys both being in the show. And you're gonna wrap up now by saying check out the liturgist podcast. And Mike, do you want to? Do you want to just give a brief update the nonprofit part of it or the Patreon?

Michael Gungor 1:07:24

Oh, yeah. I mean, you can go to so we are. We are supported by monthly patrons. And we're starting a nonprofit to be able to take more donations to like larger donations to be able to curate and create more of this technology like we're talking about, like actually, we'd love to hire artists to do work and we'd like to start some publishing things and basically just putting out as much of this sort of work again, calling it non dual Christian technology as possible. But if you would like to check that out, yeah, check out the podcast or go to the litigious calm, and there's lots going on, we come out with, we create not just the podcast, but a lot of stuff. A lot of stuff, meditations and art and music and all kinds of stuff.

Ray Abel 1:08:17

Perfect. All right. Well, you can check that out. We'll put a link up on the research the news.com website, if you go there, all of our links are there, you can share this podcast. Please feel free to share this podcast if it's if it's terrible. If you don't like it, feel free to reach out to me personally. So we can change whatever it is or talk about what needs to be changed. But if it's great, share it, I don't need the price. Just share the share the podcast so we can be able to have more conversations like this and we look forward to being back again soon. I want to thank our guests for being here. And with that, we're gonna wrap up so we'll see you next Sunday live on Facebook and the podcast will be posted shortly after. Talk to you soon.