



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
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Episode 022: Being Church in a town of 400

How are we the church in a town of 400? In this podcast episode we talk with Tina Dillon, a member of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Portland Missouri. What was like to move to a small town, be invited to and welcomed by a church, the difference that has made in her life, and the ways St. Mark's is involved in finding God's work in Callaway County.

Harry Leip: Welcome to Jesus Hacked. I'm your host for this podcast, Deacon Harry Leip, serving at Trinity in the Central West End in St. Louis City. For this episode, listeners, the podcast has hit the road. Instead of taping from our usual home at Church of the Advent in Crestwood, Missouri, which is a southwestern suburb of St. Louis, we're coming to you from Jefferson City today, specifically Grace Church, to be exact. As many of you know, stories of faith have no geographical boundaries, whether they come from our urban St. Louis area or our rural communities up in Missouri. Our diocese is blessed with these countless stories, from a diversity of places. For this episode, we're going to talk about faith in community from the perspective of a small country church in a small river town. To help us with this great conversation, I'm very happy to welcome Tina Dillon, a parishioner at St. Marks Portland, a small community nestled along the bank of the Missouri River in eastern Callaway County. Tina, welcome to the podcast.

Tina Dillon: Thank you. Good morning.

- Harry Leip: I'm guessing many people listening to this podcast may not be familiar with Portland ... Portland, Missouri, on the river. Can you give us an idea of what Portland is like? If we were to visit there, what would we see?
- Tina Dillon: It's a very small river town, like you said. The population is less than 400. Right in town you would see probably around 10 homes on either side of the road, then there is the Portland Community Building, and then there's a small bar and grill, [Holtzouser's 00:01:42] Bar and Grill, and it's near the river access. The river access is also another focal point, I guess, of the community. It's used a lot. Everyone sees each other there and that river access is pretty popular.
- Harry Leip: Sure. I'm assuming, again hopefully not too stereotypical, but since it is a small community, a lot of people know each other by name and may even know each other's business. It sounds ... Would I be correct in assuming it's a sort of a small, tight knit community?
- Tina Dillon: Yes, yes. Everyone pretty much knows everyone, and it's very tight knit.
- Harry Leip: That's great. St. Marks, from what I understand, about five years ago celebrated it's 100th birthday in the community. Tell us a little bit about the community of St. Marks, and about the membership there.
- Tina Dillon: The membership is around 60, and we have around 30 active members that come on Sundays, even though our Sunday attendance really averages anywhere from four to fifteen on a Sunday. Also, in St. Marks it's pretty tight knit.
- Harry Leip: I understand, Tina, that you are not a native of Portland, or mid-Missouri, but you in fact moved to mid-Missouri a number of years ago, and came to Portland, or came to St. Marks, specifically in Portland. Can you give us a little idea of how that came about, how you came to Portland and said this is where I want to be, in this community?
- Tina Dillon: I moved up in '92, when I got married, and my husband and myself worked, so I could go to college and we started our family. I got my professional job for the state. That was when I met one of the members from St. Marks, and while I was looking for a church home when I started that job, and I had went to several churches in the Fulton area to visit, and to see what I was wanting. I grew up in the Baptist church and knew that that's not where I wanted to be now. When I got the job, my professional job, that's when I met the member, it's Carolyn Leiper and she offered to show me her church and talk about that. That's when it all just fell into place. I came to the first couple of services and then I knew that was my home.
- Harry Leip: You came to the community through just another person casually mentioning I go to a church that's great, why don't you come some Sunday. That personal interaction, it sounds like how you got to know the community at the beginning.
- Tina Dillon: Yes, yes. That's for sure, because even though I had never moved, I didn't go to Portland. Portland is such a small town. If you don't have a friend there, and maybe you don't go out to eat a lot or go to the bars and grills, whatever, then

you just don't go and that was us. Being a young family, very busy, going to college, doing different things, I just didn't go to Portland. Until I met that particular friend, I didn't really have a lot of friends in the Portland area. That's how I started meeting more people. Once I met her and I started going to the church, then of course I started meeting a lot more people.

Harry Leip: I'm painting this picture in my head of an established church community in a small town, and then you arrive as the new person, with a brand new story. No one's familiar with you. How did that feel to be sort of the new person in a church community, where it's a pretty small town. I'm assuming multi-generational families have been at this community. How did that feel?

Tina Dillon: It was sort of exciting, and it was really interesting to meet these new people, and the person that brought me into the church, she made me feel so comfortable and all the other members did. It was never intimidating or uncomfortable. It was just they just invited you in and automatically felt like a part of the community, and even like I grew up there, even though I didn't.

Harry Leip: Wow.

Tina Dillon: They were so inviting, and I got to know so many people.

Harry Leip: That sounds really powerful, because I have this picture in my head of you being embraced into this small community, and obviously you've stayed there because you came to Portland, or came to St. Marks around 2001, right?

Tina Dillon: Right, right. The experience with them was just such a positive one, and like you said, they embraced me. The experiences before St. Marks, just trying to find a church, they were very different. They were what I was kind of expecting, being uncomfortable, not really being accepted, not many ... I only went to three or four. Not many had a welcoming committee. You know, "Hi, are you new? Come sit down." None of that. One I did stay at for six months, it was part of my husband's family had went to that church. Even in the six months I didn't feel part of them, part of the church, and I tried to go to the adult bible studies. My children were in the Sunday school, and it just didn't feel like a fit.

Harry Leip: Right. So if I'm hearing correctly, it sounds like the community was ready to embrace people. They had an attitude of openness, welcome, that it sounds like that help you connect rather well with them.

Tina Dillon: Yep. Yep, they do. They still do. We have gotten new members, two new confirmations in the last six months. I think people that come are just very comfortable. I love that everyone there even before me is so welcoming and accepting.

Harry Leip: Right. One of the paradigms that we have in this diocese that you're probably familiar with is at times we become a little bit focused on numbers, and so we say, "Well, two people are great to be confirmed. Isn't that great." But for a community of a smaller community, two people are super important because that is a wonderful gift to the community.

Tina Dillon: Yes, it's a huge deal, especially when we have those Sundays where there might only be four people at church on a Sunday. Because we're so small, and then especially when summer comes and people are so busy, you do get those lower numbers. But having two more active members is a huge deal.

Harry Leip: That's great. I want to talk a little bit about St. Marks. I was looking at the number of ministries, the number of things going on, and you all are a busy community. Can you take us through that a little bit, because I know one of the areas that you all become involved with is elder ministry. Can you talk about your ministry to a local nursing home?

Tina Dillon: Yes. A deacon has been involved in our church, Nancy [Belcher 00:08:35]. She is now a disaster deacon, as well. She has brought us a couple of things for our church to do and become involved in service. The elder ministry is also something that she brought. We will go once a month, after church. We first meet at the local bar and grill in Portland, and have lunch and kind of wait, because the nursing home has a little bit of a routine and you want to make sure as many members are maybe up and out of bed and had lunch, and that kind of thing.

Harry Leip: Of course.

Tina Dillon: We might meet there, have lunch and then the ones that can go to the nursing home. Everyone goes down to Mokane. It's the Riverview Nursing Home, and then have a little bit of fellowship and sing-alongs. They've enjoyed it, and everyone's been getting close. They're appreciative of the church members coming. They're getting to know us and then our members are getting to know them. It's really nice.

Harry Leip: In getting to know them, it sounds like you all are developing a core of parishioners, or a core of people, like you said, that will gather to eat and then will go to the nursing home on a regular basis to be with the nursing home community. I love that idea of both sides forming relationships with each other, because that's really hard.

Tina Dillon: Right, right. Exactly right. It's really been a great service.

Harry Leip: Just to be clear, I think Nancy may have had a hand in it, starting, but it sounds like to me that you all as a community are sustaining it when you go each time.

Tina Dillon: Oh, right. Right. That's true.

Harry Leip: What have people said about that, because I know at times it's rather difficult emotionally to go to a nursing home, somewhere like that, and I know there's a lot different feelings. How has the community responded? What have they felt about stepping into this new ministry?

Tina Dillon: Everyone's been pretty positive about it. The emotional part is there, especially when you lose someone in the nursing home, and it's pretty emotional. But other than that the community's been just awesome. It's just been a positive experience and a great service.

Harry Leip: Wonderful. I know with St. Marks being part of this small community, there are regular events that you do that you invite the community and that's become traditional for Portland. Can you tell us about a couple of those? I think those are really interesting, the events that you all do.

Tina Dillon: Sure. The first one of the year is the [inaudible 00:11:08] Tuesday Sausage and Pancake Supper, and we actually start it at 11:00 in the morning and we do it that day. We have regulars from the community that we always look for to show up, which is nice.

Harry Leip: So pancakes and sausage for lunch.

Tina Dillon: Yes.

Harry Leip: Can't go wrong with that.

Tina Dillon: Yeah. That's pretty great, and I think a lot of people in the community, even that don't attend our church, they look forward to that. In August we have ... Just started having an annual fish fry in the second week of August, I think. That was pretty well received last year. We have Bingo in November and that was a new thing. It was pretty intense at first to get it started and get your license and permits and things like that from the Gaming Commission.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Tina Dillon: It's been worth it. We have a community Thanksgiving service we do with the churches, the other local churches. There's a couple. There's a Baptist church and then there's a Free Methodist church around Portland. We've taken turns hosting Thanksgiving.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Tina Dillon: We do that, that's pretty nice.

Harry Leip: It sounds like you all are a major piece of Portland, and if the community was not there, it sounds like Portland would be diminished, because you're so part of the community and have been for over 100 years.

Tina Dillon: Right, right. I like to think that we're pretty involved in everything in Portland.

Harry Leip: Absolutely. I've heard a story, and I won't spill it. I'll let you tell it a little bit, but as we've talked about before on a previous episode of the podcast, I understand that your community took the time working with Deacon Nancy to fill out the Episcopal Asset map, gathering as a community to put that information together. Can you talk about how that went and the great part of the story is where you had to go to find WiFi to allow this to happen?

Tina Dillon: Yeah. The WiFi that's available in Portland is at the bar and grill, the Holtzouser Bar and Grill. We were able to meet there, and there's lots of room. They're very friendly. Everyone that comes to that bar and grill, usually the local

people and everyone knows everyone. We were able to use the WiFi there and update that asset map. We had a little dinner while we were doing that, and it was a really good time. We look forward to continuing the disaster efforts and helping Nancy in anything that she needs from us.

Harry Leip: That's great. I just have this image in my head of people walking in for lunch or dinner and saying ... A number of people huddled around a laptop talking about church and ministry and Jesus and all that. That's such a great picture in a small town, because I'm guessing a lot of the people who walked in, like you said, are regulars and know you all, and they know, "Oh, it's a church meeting," or something.

Tina Dillon: Right. It's a popular motorcycle stop, especially for summertime. The motorcycles come through 94 and then they head through to Herman and through the wineries. That's also a popular stop there. That's the same place where we'll have lunch before the nursing home visits, same place.

Harry Leip: That's great. That's great. I love that, the diners and the church people and the bikers. What a great combination. I also understand that there's a new ministry that you all have taken a couple months to discern, on the Order of the Daughters of the King. Can you just tell us a little bit about what that group is, since some of our listeners may not be familiar with that? What the group is, and then how you all have been discerning over the last couple of months, because that sounds so interesting.

Tina Dillon: It's an order for women, and most our membership, the biggest part is women. We were interested in becoming a part of them. It is Rule of Service, Rule of Prayer and evangelism, and we feel like that's what we do anyway. We reach out to community members, and if we ever have a change of someone, like Carolyn did for me, if they're looking for a church home we invite them, visit people, maybe if they can't get out we'll visit them. We thought, "We do this anyway," and to become a part of the Order of the Daughters of the King would just help us all in other ways as well as prayer and just learning to be more consistent in prayer and in things like that. Another thing to help us, I guess, spiritually grow. Our discernment period's over, and actually tomorrow morning it a meeting with Mary Steiling from the diocese. She's coming to see us in Portland. She says she's put it in her GPS so I'm hoping ... I'm going to call her to make sure ... Maybe I'll have to meet her somewhere and she can follow me. But we'll see her in the morning, and any last minute questions we have, we're going to throw at her because we're turning our application in. I believe there's an induction ceremony, and Marshall Crossnoe, our vicar, he'll be there to do that for us. We're all looking forward to that.

Harry Leip: This will all be tomorrow, Sunday morning.

Tina Dillon: Tomorrow we're going to talk about that part of it, the induction ceremony, picking the date, turning in our final paperwork in after our three month discernment period. That discernment period was ... There was a study guide we followed.

Harry Leip: Okay. This is a new chapter beginning for your community, being a part of a different organization.

Tina Dillon: Yeah, and there's seven of us. Some had some questions and how this was going to affect them, what was expected, maybe, of us as a chapter, but it's exactly what the things that we already do, so it's just going to be great to have a few more things we can do as service to the community.

Harry Leip: Absolutely. I love what you said. It's already reflective of what you all are already doing. You're gathering for prayer, gathering, like you said, a meal together, gathering to do ministry outside of the church.

Tina Dillon: Right, and support each other. We text back and forth, share daily scriptures or things that maybe mean something to everyone.

Harry Leip: Right. So community inside of a community.

Tina Dillon: Yes, yeah.

Harry Leip: That's wonderful. Tina, sort of for a last question for you, I just want to ask, since you've been at Portland for a good number of years, what's been one of the biggest surprises for you? What has been one of those moments where it has been, "Wow, I'm in the right place at the right time." Can you share a moment where you felt that connectiveness?

Tina Dillon: There's probably several, but definitely ...

Harry Leip: Great.

Tina Dillon: Definitely my first introduction to the church, and when I was invited to come down and check them out and see how it was. I think that was definitely it, because I knew I was going back. Then just many moments over the last years. We have little ones that are now in college, so we have that experience of we go to do our Sunday school, we got to do different things with the kids, and now they're grown and gone and we're back to just adults, no kids. Those little moments, just everything over the years always reinforced to me I'm in the right place.

Harry Leip: It sounds like that very much feels like your spiritual home for you.

Tina Dillon: Yes, yes.

Harry Leip: That's so powerful. Great. Thank you, Tina, for this conversation. This was wonderful.

Tina Dillon: Thank you.