



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

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Episode 030: Journey: one church's conversation about full LGBT inclusion

This episode comes from Christ Church in Cape Girardeau and members Stephanie Miller, Chris Masters, and James Boyer talk with host Harry Leip about how their church began and continues the conversation on embracing its LGBT members, what it looks and feels like, and how the church can be a safe and welcoming space.

Harry Leip: Welcome to JesusHacked. I'm your host for this podcast, Deacon Harry Leip, serving at Trinity Church Central West End, in St. Louis City. Today, we're coming to you from Cape Girardeau, Missouri in the southern part of the diocese. As many of our listeners know, our social justice ministries take many shapes and sizes across the diocese and indeed in our own individual communities. Sometimes these ministries begin when a community takes a look at not only their surrounding community but also the people that walk into the church on Sunday looking for a church home.

Today, we're going to talk about how the conversation has begun at Christ Episcopal Church revolving around LGBT people. To help with this conversation, I'm very happy that we're going to be joined by three parishioners of this community, Stephanie Miller, Chris Masters and James Boyer. Welcome to the podcast.

Stephanie Miller: Thank you.

Chris Masters: Thank you.

James Boyer: Thank you.

Harry Leip: Stephanie, I'm curious. You relocated back to Cape Girardeau, because I believe that you had been here. Were you born in this area?

Stephanie Miller: Yes. I grew up in a small town in southeast Missouri.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Stephanie Miller: As I was making some work transitions, I decided I could live wherever I wanted to live, so I wanted to move back home. My partner and I decided, because we have family in this area, we decided to move back to Cape Girardeau, and then we started looking for a church that we could attend and be comfortable with.

Harry Leip: Okay. You had lived here and you left and you came back. Did you sense that Cape was a bit more open as the country had sort of moved to a little bit more openness around LGBT lives? Did you sense that in the greater community?

Stephanie Miller: Yes. It felt a little bit more open to me. I could still see spots that it was conservative. You could be sitting in a restaurant and you can definitely tell that the person sitting on the right side of you is ultra-conservative, and then maybe somebody sitting to the left of you may be a little bit more progressive in their thinking. But from the area that I came from, Cape definitely was a breath of fresh air, although I think there probably are stereotypes that we still need to work on some.

Harry Leip: Sure. Absolutely. Then, from what you shared earlier then, you and your partner had moved back and at some point, you were ready to look for a faith community.

Stephanie Miller: Two things had happened there. I had a former boss that was an Episcopalian who just was determined that I needed to look at that faith, because he knew about my life and knew where I had come from. I had that in the back of my mind but then we also started investigating churches in the area, and to be quite honest, we had always been captivated with the red door church. Knew that it was probably a little bit more open to more social trends than some of the denominations that either I or my partner had been involved with as we grew up.

We just, we went on, the first thing we did was go on the internet and start looking at the webpage for this particular church, and we really

liked what we saw. We liked what we read. I did more investigation just into the Episcopal faith on its own merit. Then we just decided to come to church one Sunday, and the rest is kind of history. Everybody that Sunday was extremely welcoming. Not only were we both going to a totally different denomination than what we had ever been subjected to.

Harry Leip: Right.

Stephanie Miller: But then we were also a little scared about what was going to happen to us in that church. My partner actually wanted to walk in front of me going into the door, and just go on in and sit down and have me come in. I said, "Oh, no way. We've come too far. I'm not going to do that." So we went in and sat down. Immediately people start asking us our names and shaking our hands.

Harry Leip: Wow. That is really powerful. Just to be clear, the discussion you all were having was should you walk in as separate individuals or should you come in together as a couple, like a straight couple would or any other couple.

Stephanie Miller: Correct.

Harry Leip: That idea of being authentic from the get go. I'm just imagining that was incredibly powerful, that statement of your lives.

Stephanie Miller: It was. It was very reaffirming to me. It was a place in my life where it was very important to me. My partner has always been very authentic and has lived her life as a gay woman since she left the little town that we grew up in, but she does not ever want to be in a place where she offends people.

Harry Leip: Sure.

Stephanie Miller: Or makes them uncomfortable, which I'm kind of at the point in my life where I don't care.

Harry Leip: Sure. The gift of age.

Chris Masters: Yes.

Harry Leip: Just a quick thing jumping back just a moment for our listeners, you talked about that little church with the red door. Can you say a little bit about that? Because my understanding is the identity of Christ Episcopal Church sort of in the greater community revolves around that image, right? Of a red door?

Stephanie Miller: Well I think so. That was about what I knew. I knew a little bit about the Episcopal Church, because of the red door. It stood out. We

knew that there was an Episcopal Church here. Actually a friend of ours lives in this neighborhood so we would drive by this church and see it. The red door called to us. I don't know any other way to say it.

Harry Leip: I love that. So I'd like to start at the beginning. We're in Cape Girardeau. We're not in a metro area. We're not in metro St. Louis, metro Kansas City. Some of our listeners may be surprised that that conversation is going on because there's that sort of stereotype that, near the boot hill, that conversation is totally shut down. Can someone tell me about how that conversation began at Christ Episcopal Church here? Chris, I know you've got a story about this. Can you share that with us?

Chris Masters: Well I have a friend down in Arkansas and I went to church with him one weekend and he also goes to an Episcopal Church and they have a very large community of LGBT in their church. They actually have a Bible study on Sunday afternoon, open to all LGBT, allies, whoever wants to come. I joined him one Sunday and I thought how neat this was. Me being here at Christ Episcopal, I got with our rector, Edie Byrd and talked to her about possibly starting a Bible study here for LGBT. She was all on board for it, so that's how we got started.

Harry Leip: So Chris, it sounds like that there wasn't an existing, either ministry or conversation going at Christ Episcopal Church here. That was the first opportunity to have that conversation now that Reverend Edie was here.

Chris Masters: Actually it was the second. I later found out that there was a conversation way before I came here and way before Edie came here that was pretty much shut down.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Chris Masters: It was a hush-hush kind of deal. Of course, I had only been here for maybe four or five months.

Harry Leip: So how did that feel, knowing that that had not previously happened in the community? There was no existing ministry. There was no existing group. I'm guessing that took a bit of risk to bring that up?

Chris Masters: Well at the time, again, I had no idea, but later after I found out, yes, it was a little unnerving that it had been shut down and I was starting it up again. It was causing some conflicts.

Harry Leip: Right. James, can you tell us, what is your feeling about Cape Girardeau? How safe and open is the community at large, which Christ Episcopal Church being sort of in the downtown area, what is it like being in this sort of rural area? How safe is that?

James Boyer: Overall you feel pretty safe in this area. The downtown area is close to the university, which is more liberal. They just recently started a LGBT faculty and staff alliance.

Harry Leip: Okay.

James Boyer: The conversation is definitely going there within the university. Now as you get outside this area into the more rural parts of Cape Girardeau, Cape Girardeau county and southeast Missouri as a whole, it becomes maybe less safe to proclaim your sexuality.

Harry Leip: Sure. A bit more problematic it sounds like. Okay. Thank you for that. Chris, Reverend Edie says let's go ahead and do that. How did that, how did that begin, that work of forming that group because it sounds like that led into a greater conversation?

Chris Masters: Well as I remember, I got with Edie and a couple other people and we just kind of discussed, okay how are we going to start this? What are the rules? What are we going to do? Then I got friends involved from the congregation. Edie and I also went to SEMO (Southeast Missouri State University) and sat in on one of the LGBT Alliance groups to let them know, hey, if you are interested, we have a Bible study going on at Christ Episcopal Church. We had one or two people join us.

Harry Leip: Okay. Join in that conversation that were not already parishioners of your community.

Chris Masters: Yes.

Harry Leip: Okay. So Chris can you take us into that Bible study? What was it called and what was that about?

Chris Masters: When we first had our meeting, we opened it up to everybody, which we had like six, seven people. We opened it up and asked everybody what would be a good name for this group? We went around and one girl from SEMO, or one student from SEMO said how about Journey? That just really stuck with everybody because we are on our own journey to figure out where we belong and how we live our life. From there, we just took passages out of the Bible and just kind of talked about it, how it related to our life.

Harry Leip: I'm guessing the context 'about our life' would be how does this fit into the context of us as lesbian and gay people.

Chris Masters: Yes.

Harry Leip: Intersecting with God in the God story in this Bible study. How did that go? Was that easy with this group? I'm guessing it was probably a bit safe because everyone has a common context?

Chris Masters: Yes. It, when we first started, it was a little kind of rough going, because you're opening yourself up to all these people that you kind of sort of know. You go to church with most of them, so you see them on Sunday and that's about it. You talk to them on Sunday but you don't talk about personal stuff. The two students from SEMO, you never met them before.

Harry Leip: Right.

Chris Masters: You're opening yourself up and we made one rule that what basically, what is said here stays here. We do not talk about it to anybody else.

Harry Leip: The group created a rule around safe space and that what you all share from your heart, from your spirit, stays in that group. I'm guessing that that really helped the group sort of be able to share a bit more because it was pretty much safe.

Chris Masters: Yes.

Harry Leip: Okay. James were you also part of this group?

James Boyer: Yes. I was part of the first Journey group. It was a very therapeutic group to say the least. Everybody of course had their stories of other evangelical congregations that they had been a part of because when they found this safe space so to speak, they had been maybe in non-denominational, which sometimes means Pentecostal.

Harry Leip: Absolutely.

James Boyer: Sometimes Baptist, which they weren't always accepted. It was kind of a moment of healing and helping them to talk about these things in a church but not so much church setting. In a church affiliated group where they were being told, it was okay to be who they were and live their lives without hiding.

Harry Leip: Exactly. I love that image that you've got people from different faith traditions all coming together that I may be Pentecostal. This person may be non-denominational, UCC, but you're all together sort of learning and all those different paths coming together and informing the group, everyone's lived tradition. That sounds really powerful. I'm guessing that led to another conversation? I've heard something about that that led perhaps to the town hall with your community? James or Chris, can you

tell us a little bit about how did the town hall come about with Christ Episcopal Church with your community?

James Boyer: The Journey group was just starting with the blessing of Reverend Edie. We didn't really to the vestry or anything like that. It was more just a part of our ministries. As that came out to the congregation through our newsletter and that sort of thing, they began to ask questions about what is Journey and what exactly, what kind of ministry are they doing over there in Journey?

Harry Leip: Sure.

James Boyer: Once they found out it was a LGBT ministry, that drew some concerns from the congregation. Reverend Edie put together a town hall meeting where all of the congregation were welcome to come and speak.

Chris Masters: I think one of the concerns was we had, Matthew and Brandon, they started coming and they wanted to actually get married in the church, so they were talking to Edie. That was a major thing for this church, we were kind of lopsided on do we want to have it, do we want to accept them here at the church or do we not? This town hall meeting was kind of something to start the conversation on can we accept this and move on, or is this going to be something that stops and says no, we're not doing this.

Harry Leip: So Chris, put us to the day before that town hall. What were your feelings, knowing that this was going to happen for the entire community?

Chris Masters: I wouldn't say I was real apprehensive but then there was a little kind of apprehensive point where I was like ...

James Boyer: I would say I was very anxious about the whole situation.

Harry Leip: Really?

Chris Masters: It, you had mixed feelings on it. I'll say that.

James Boyer: It could have gone the other way.

Chris Masters: It could have really gone a bad way, and I mean we had six or eight gay people sitting there and then the rest of them were all straight or asexual, whatever you want to say. We're all kind of hovered in the corner of a table, and everybody else is stretched out, looking at us.

Harry Leip: Sort of like a defensive posture, sort of huddling together because I'm hearing there's very much an element of the unknown because sort of the cat's out of the bag. You all are going to be talking as a community about

what this means and how important that is, since that's people's lives, people's spirit sort of hang in the balance. Who can talk about the, about how the town hall went? If there's a story there or how that conversation went on that day?

Chris Masters: It went really well. We did hear a story about a lady having her son come out to her. For me, looking at her, I was thinking that she was going to be against this whole thing.

Harry Leip: Really?

Chris Masters: For her to tell the story that her son finally came out to her, and it just totally changed her point of view, her thinking of LGBT.

Harry Leip: Because it was personal to her because it was the son.

Chris Masters: Because it was personal.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Chris Masters: It was a huge thing for her to tell everybody this personal thing. For me, that was just, that was just shocking and eye-opening to me, that a person that I would think would be against was totally for it.

Harry Leip: Right, because I know some of the stories from the past is if you had an LGBT child, it was sort of shrouded in shame and it was sort of the family secret. That's certainly not become the case anymore, slowly, but I would think that there's a great amount of security and a great amount of power in the fact that she was able to tell her story but not everyone may have known. It sound like that was the town hall giving everyone space to sort of share their stories?

James Boyer: Right. Definitely tore down a lot of walls that had been built up over years of not talking about the issue.

Harry Leip: James, how many people would you say attended? Was this a pretty good chunk of the community?

James Boyer: It was well attended by our congregation. The community at large, not so much, but the congregation ...

Chris Masters: I would say probably about 40.

James Boyer: 40 I was going to say.

Harry Leip: So your church was very invested in this conversation and what it meant.

Chris Masters: I will say this. We did have someone there that was very opposed and he made it known.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Chris Masters: And his wife made it known that they did not tolerate this.

Harry Leip: Right.

Chris Masters: They did eventually leave the church because of what they heard at the town hall meeting, that everybody was for it. We did have one family that left the church because of it.

Harry Leip: Okay. It sounds like in that moment though, they had a chance to hear other people talking, and they in turn, also shared their story, so you understood why they left the community. Because it was just something that they could not accept. Okay. What came out of that town hall to where you're now very much about an outward welcoming community for LGBT people in the community? Did the vestry issue a proclamation? Did the community just sort of come to a consensus and say, okay. We're good with this.

Chris Masters: I think before the town ... This is Chris. I think before the town hall meeting, then Edie had the vestry do their own group talk.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Chris Masters: If that went well, then they were going to move on to the town hall meeting. Apparently it went well, so then that just kind of started the ball rolling.

Harry Leip: It sounds like in both word and deed, you all became a community that said, yup. We're going to welcome LGBT people the way we would welcome anyone else.

Chris Masters: Well I think we were just pretty much out there saying, hey. We're new to the church. We're going to accept people no matter what. You can follow along with us or not.

Harry Leip: What I find particularly powerful is that it's not like the church was making a decision for the future. It's not like they're sitting down like how can we attract Stephanie in a year. You all were already there, James, Chris, others. You were already in community, saying we're here. Community, what does, church community, what does that mean. James how did that ...

James Boyer: Much like any other church across the country, they're slowly dwindling. The membership is dwindling, so they needed membership. They need membership, and we, as the gay community, we're a big part of their younger membership at that point, which was very much noticed at, like Chris said. We were in one group. They were all in another group, so the fact that ... I don't want to say they had to accept us, but in order to continue to grow, it was in their best interest to be open and affirming and accept us into the church.

Harry Leip: Absolutely.

James Boyer: To move forward.

Harry Leip: I'm curious, and this is sort of a question for all three of you. I'm guessing being in community now, where it's not a secret, your lives are there along with everyone's lives there. Has anyone in the community come to you and said, "Hey, I want to ask you about something," because that openness is already happening in your community.

Chris Masters: Kind of going with that question, Journey had a very powerful meeting one night. It was about transgender. So we actually ended up having a two-part meeting about transgender and it was very raw. We got to learn a lot about transgender. It really opened my eyes on that.

Harry Leip: Really?

Chris Masters: Because I just figured it was male to female, female to male. I didn't realize there was a whole broad spectrum of transgender. We had two females that were transitioning to male, and we did have one that was male that ...

Harry Leip: That were transitioning.

Chris Masters: That transitioned into female. Basically we let them talk, and tell their story, how they dealt with things. Whenever you talk to a transgender person, then you're supposed to ask them what their pronouns are. What do you want to be addressed as? Not he or she or whatever. You don't assume. You have to ask.

Harry Leip: Sure. It sounds like even when this group is meeting, doing Bible study, you're still learning from each other, learning about gender identity and how God's creation is incredibly diverse, especially when it comes with gender identity and other issues in the LGBT community. That's wonderful. For the three of you, I just have recognizing that this has been a journey, I want to ask you all about this event that I understand will be happening next weekend from when we're recording, that this will be perhaps the first same gender marriage in your church, in Christ

Episcopal Church. Two men will be married in the church, like any other couple would be. How is the community participating in this particular wedding, this first wedding of these two wonderful gentlemen?

James Boyer: It's been great. They have welcomed, the congregation has been a huge part of the wedding from the planning, all the way to the actual event next Saturday. Chris is in the wedding. Both of our vergers, we have two vergers in our church and both of them are actively in the ...

Chris Masters: Going to be in the wedding.

James Boyer: In the planning and in the wedding. I know our men's group is helping out with some of the finite details at the end, such as decorating the truck and that fun stuff.

Harry Leip: Decorating the truck.

James Boyer: Right.

Harry Leip: Love it. It really sounds like that the community is not going to be sort of a participants with prayer and responding, but they're deeply woven into these two gentlemen's lives coming together and sort of reflective of the love and the value that these two gentlemen have for your community.

Chris Masters: That was one of their, one of their requirements, that our congregation participate in their wedding. Not just be in the pews but actually participate.

Harry Leip: From what I'm hearing is, the community is enthusiastically jumping in.

Chris Masters: Oh yeah.

Harry Leip: Both feet, to make that happen. What has that been like for you, just from your own personal ... Again, you may know these two gentlemen, but has that done anything to your heart, to basically sort of know that you're in a community now where there's a very, very public sign that this is okay. Because again I've heard that this information's in the newspaper in Cape Girardeau. It's been advertised like anyone else's marriage. What does that say to your heart?

Stephanie Miller: This is Steph. I'm, this is probably not the right kind of word to say but I'm very proud of our church. I'm very proud that that's going to happen there. But it still seems like to me like it's almost unbelievable, given the church that I grew up in, it will never happen there. To belong to a church where, moving forward, very proud of our rector that she goes out. I know how she believes about things but I know it can't be comfortable for her on days, and her courage is an example to me,

constantly. I think our whole church, just some amazing people there because I know some of them have been on their own journeys and not just been set. They all turned 40 or 50 or whatever and this is how I believe, and I'm not changing.

Harry Leip: Sure.

Stephanie Miller: The real indication to me is that our church has continued to change and I very much am a studier of change. I know that our church will be okay and continue to grow because anything that continues to change is going to grow.

Harry Leip: Well said. Thank you Stephanie. Guys, anything, any comments from yourselves, to give, having been there a big longer than Stephanie.

Chris Masters: This is Chris. I'm proud of our church for taking the steps. A bit apprehensive on the wedding. You're always scared that something or someone may come in and cause a problem. That's, I mean, a little bit scared, but a lot hopeful and excited that this is happening. I'm glad to be a part of it.

Harry Leip: Absolutely. James, I'm going to leave you with the last word. Obviously this seems very much like a conversation about journey from the, literally the Bible study and then the town hall and then opening to this moment. It seems like such a journey. How does that resonate with you? With your heart?

James Boyer: Well, it makes me very proud to belong to such a church community that we can have these conversations and make the progress that we've made in our congregation and the church in general from where we began three years ago to next Saturday, this wedding. It's just, I'm just very proud of Christ Episcopal in Cape Girardeau.

Harry Leip: Great. And I would echo that too. I'm very proud of what you all are doing. Having that journey with the community walking together to discern a path forward, leading up to this wonderful occasion next week. Thank you all, the three of you, for this conversation. It's been very illuminating.

Stephanie Miller: You're welcome.

Chris Masters: Thank you.

James Boyer: Thank you.