



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
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Episode 026: When the Standing Committee sits down: the bishop's council of advice

In today's conversation host Shug Goodlow and guest Dr. Adam Pearson, from Holy Communion Church, talk a bit about one of the governing bodies of the diocese, called the Standing Committee. They both serve on it currently, and talk about its purpose and work, how that work affects the health of the church, and also who might be drawn to this ministry.

Shug Goodlow: Welcome to Jesus Hacked, a weekly podcast on storytelling faith. I'm Shug Goodlow, head verger and acolyte master at Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis, Missouri. Today, we are talking with Dr. Adam Pearson, a member of the Standing Committee for the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. Good evening, Dr. Pearson.

Adam Pearson: Good evening.

Shug Goodlow: Dr. Pearson, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Adam Pearson: Sure. I was born and raised in St. Louis to a family of educators. I'm actually the lone sheep in that I didn't really go into teaching initially, but my father, mother, brother, and sister all went into primary and secondary education. I was the one healthcare professional. I was raised in North County,

and raised Missionary Baptist, up until about six years ago, is when I started coming round to learning more about Episcopalianism, after my wife Courtney and I got married. I'm an occupational therapist by trade, and what I do is I run a supportive housing development in south St. Louis, where we help move in folks off the streets, and get them counseling, and nursing services, and substance abuse counseling. That keeps my life very adventurous.

Shug Goodlow: You're a fairly new Episcopalian. Would you like to share with us where you worship?

Adam Pearson: Sure. I worship at Holy Communion in U City. It's a phenomenal church. I've gotten the opportunity to get involved a little bit there with some of the young adult activities. The majority of my involvement with the diocese is with the Standing Committee. I've been there, like I said, for about six years, and I love it.

Shug Goodlow: Well, speaking of the Standing Committee, could you share with us just what is the standing committee?

Adam Pearson: Sure. Sure. I can. I'll give you the textbook, website definition. The standing committee is a council of advice to the bishop. If need be, in the event of the office of the bishop becoming vacant, we serve as the ecclesiastical authority to the diocese. We get together monthly, and we talk about a number of different subjects, all for the sake of advising the bishop on various matters, or listening to his concerns. We cover matters of real estate, folks who are up for ordination in the ministry, all the way to the nitty-gritties of bylaws. We do a little bit of everything, all for the goal of helping to move the diocese forward and support the bishop in his leadership.

Shug Goodlow: How does one come to be a member of the Standing Committee?

Adam Pearson: Well, you have to be ... I guess you have to be nominated by somebody. Then you have to accept the nomination, and write an essay, and fill out some paperwork. I don't know if one necessarily needs to feel called to do it, but I think you should have a heart to serve, and want to learn a little bit more about how the diocese is operating from an administrative standpoint. I first got into it because the Rev. Rebecca Ragland recommended that I submit my name for nomination, and I did so, and the rest is history.

Shug Goodlow: What would you say was the gotcha moment, when you really knew this was something you wanted to do?

Adam Pearson: I am a sucker for leadership opportunities. One thing that Rebecca put in the email is that this was pretty much the highest-level committee in the diocese. As soon as I read the words "highest level," I was like, "Okay. Let's do it. Let's jump right on in." Of course, I had no idea what I was doing or what I was getting myself into, but I like the idea of supporting the diocese in this manner. I like the idea of learning about different systems and different ways of thinking about church behind the scenes. I think she drew me in with the promise that we were going to be doing some higher-level stuff, and I've been very satisfied since then.

Shug Goodlow: By virtue of your membership on the Standing Committee, then I would assume that there are both lay and clergy on the Standing Committee?

Adam Pearson: That's correct, yeah. It's about an equal mixture. I am, of course, a lay member. Typically, with the Standing Committee, the president of the Standing Committee kind of rotates from year to year between a lay person and clergy, and so it's a great mixture. I came in very green, because I was a brand new Episcopalian when I first joined. I didn't know a whole lot about church policy and liturgy. All of this was very new to me, and so my perspective as the new guy on the block was that, "I'm here to learn, and here to offer a perspective of a new member, and a new lay member." I think the discussion each time we meet is very rich, because we get perspectives from both sides, and we have very experienced individuals in the meetings who have been members in the Episcopal Church forever, then folks who are maybe a little bit newer, like I am. The discussion each month is rich, and we have fun.

Shug Goodlow: With you being a fairly new Episcopalian again though, you brought a fresh perspective, I'm sure, to the committee. In what ways have you seen that perspective be able to influence or add to the experience?

Adam Pearson: Well, my goal is, whenever I walk into a meeting, whether it's a standing committee meeting or whether it's a meeting at church or work, is to learn as much as I can. Typically, in the meetings, I spend a lot of time asking questions, if I do speak up. One thing that I'm deathly afraid of is speaking about something that I don't know a lot about. When I do talk, it's to learn more information. In some ways, I'd like to think that I contributed by asking some probing questions about certain topics, and trying to help people maybe think about issues from a different perspective.

Shug Goodlow: What would you say has been perhaps your most challenging time and your most rewarding time on the Standing Committee so far?

Adam Pearson: Hmm, that's a good question. Well, I think the challenge was in the very beginning, because like I said, I was a new Episcopalian. I didn't even own a Book of Prayer or anything like that, didn't know the words to most hymns, and so the challenge was learning about the traditions and the roles. Even to this day, there are a lot of titles in the Episcopal Church, deans, and bishops, and canons, Canon to the Ordinary, and your title. I just learned what your title was five minutes ago. I think putting all of that together was difficult, just because from growing up in the Missionary Baptist Church, we have pastors and deacons, and that's about it. Then you have, as Baptists do, 3,000 committees per church that meet twice a day for whatever reason. It's a bit different, so I had to get used to those systems.

I think the greatest part about joining Standing Committee is that we get to discuss and debate a lot of really interesting things. We spend time talking about donations from the diocese to Uganda, and how to work with churches that are merging together, all the way to debating the order of wording in bylaws. We kind of go from this big picture thinking down to the nitty gritty details sometimes. I think I like working in that medium, learning about a lot of

different things, and trying to figure out how we can come together to make decisions to affect everybody in the diocese.

That's one thing I have enjoyed about the Standing Committee, is that Kelton and Alma White Trust has been amazing for the diocese. From the trust, we're able to operate the White Fund. What that allows us to do is to assist churches who have capital needs in gaining access to capital. What's really been intriguing is learning about the different ways we could rethink the White Fund moving forward, and figuring out how we can best serve the diocese with the funds moving forward. I'm learning a lot about finance. I'm learning a lot about capital costs and reading cash flow statements. That's also interesting. On the Standing Committee, there are ... There's at least one subcommittee that you can get involved with, a number of other opportunities within Standing Committee as well.

Shug Goodlow: You've described the Standing Committee as basically an advisory board to the bishop, so I would imagine that this has given you some valuable insight into what the bishop's job is like and what his responsibilities are.

Adam Pearson: Yeah. It's got to be tough. I think that one thing that I admire about the bishop is that he seems to be very transparent in how he thinks about things strategically, and especially from the mission focus. Obviously, his job is he sees the lay of the land, and he has to make sure he understands the health of the diocese and the health of other diocese. What I appreciated about him is that not only does he have the ability to get his hands dirty within our diocese, which he should, but he's also engaged in discussions nationwide with other bishops, and I guess even broader, because there are some other bishops in other territories or nations that we discuss as well. He's got his hands in everything. It's fascinating to learn about his processes and how he works.

Shug Goodlow: Now, I want to back up a little bit. You said earlier that you are an occupational therapist by trade.

Adam Pearson: Sure.

Shug Goodlow: Am I correct, are you the program director of Peter and Paul Community Services now? Is that what you do?

Adam Pearson: Sure. Well, let me make that distinction. Peter and Paul Community Services is a nonprofit organization. We operate eight different programs. One of the programs that the agency operates is called Garfield Place Apartments. I'm the director of that program.

Shug Goodlow: I see.

Adam Pearson: I report to the executive director. He gives all of us program directors a bit of leeway in how we want to operate our programs, and so we can all put our fine touch on what we want to do and how we want things to operate.

Shug Goodlow: Sure. Are there ways in which your professional work and your work on the Standing Committee intersect?

Adam Pearson: Oh, that's a really good question. I would say that some of the approach to thinking about systems that I've learned at Garfield has informed the way that I think about systems with the diocese. I'm obviously more informed about my professional life and what I do every day. I know a bit more about the homeless population and mental health than I do about Episcopal history, but at the same time, it helps me, when I bounce back and forth from work to Standing Committee meetings, it helps me to understand that, in order for an organization to be healthy, all of its different parts have to be healthy as well.

I'm kind of like a sum-of-all-parts kind of guy, where if you can identify some of the pieces of a program, or of a diocese, or of a whatever, that are not working correctly, if you can establish a plan to fix some of those little things and communicate what your approach is, and make sure that your mission-focused, then the health of the whole thing should theoretically follow. My work with Garfield and my work with standing committee is a little bit similar in that sometimes, I'm deep into the weeds of the details, but then other times, I'm kind of taking a birds-eye view of different things.

Shug Goodlow: Sure. I would be interested in knowing how the gospel is born out in the deliberations and decision-making of the Standing Committee.

Adam Pearson: I would be, too. No, I'm kidding. I'm kidding. I think the marriage between discussion of the gospel and then discussion about business matters is it works very well in Standing Committee. Obviously, we want to ensure the health of the diocese, but what we try to do is make sure that, with every decision we make, the end goal is how can we make the church healthier? How can we add to the church? How can we preach the gospel more effectively? While we may not necessarily debate or go into deep discussions about the gospel in standing committee meetings, I think it's the main focus of what we do to make sure that churches are healthy, to make sure that parishioners have what they need in order to make their own walks with Christ even better.

Shug Goodlow: All that being said, I would imagine that there are times when some pretty hard decisions have to be made in conducting the business of the diocese. How does that set with you?

Adam Pearson: Well, it sets okay. I enjoy, obviously, not being the only person in the room, and so there's diffuse responsibility, but I think that that's kind of what ... Difficult decisions are what needs to come out of leadership. Obviously, the church writ large, whether it's the Episcopal Church, whether it's the Christian Church writ large, it's kind of going through this huge change right now, where we're not seeing as many people join churches. There might actually ... I guess there is a net efflux of parishioners out of churches on Sundays, and so the question is, "How can we bring folks in? How can we make sure that folks hear the gospel, and understand about love, and all of these things?" To make sure all of that happens well, sometimes, you've got to make hard calls about various things.

Like I said, we discuss a lot about folks who are going through the ordination process. We talk a lot about the health of specific churches in the diocese. Sometimes, we engage in some pretty heavy discussions. I think what I

appreciate out of all of that is even when we do have to make the hard decisions, we can talk about these things in-depth with a certain level of objectivity in a group setting.

Shug Goodlow: Sure. Well, we're at that time of year when we're nearing our diocesan convention. I wonder if you have any words of wisdom, or any advice for anyone who would be considering either nominating someone or actually running for a position?

Adam Pearson: I would say, if you know somebody who is interested in serving the church through leadership, or, if you're interested yourself, go to the website, read a little bit about what the different leadership committees do, and communicate with folks on the Standing Committee or other committees, ask questions. I think that it seems like we all typically are very open to questions and open to communicating with folks. If you're interested, I say do a little bit of research. If it's something that you want to do, make sure that you're in it for the commitment. A term for the Standing Committee is four years. Make sure you're willing to devote a little bit of time each month to serving the church.

Shug Goodlow: Dr. Pearson, this has been a very insightful conversation, and I appreciate you sharing your perspective and your experiences. Thank you so much for being with us this evening.

Adam Pearson: Thank you for having me.