**It's All in Play:**
**A Round Table Conversation on Faith, Politics, and Spiritual Depth**
**November 4, 2026**

Adam Borneman: Hi friends, this is Adam Borneman with the Ministry Collaborative, and I'm pleased today to be with my colleagues, Beth Daniel, Jennifer Watley Maxell, and Leah Jackson, who's been doing a lot of facilitating work with us. And I'm happy to have her join us.

Beth Daniel: Leah, we're so glad that you're with us. Will you give us a little introduction, tell us about yourself, so that everyone who's listening can know how awesome you are, like we do?

Leah Jackson: Thanks, Beth. Hello, friends. I'm Leah Jackson, based in Atlanta, Georgia. I serve as the grant director at McAfee School of Theology and associate minister at Ray of Hope Christian Church in Decatur, where it's greater.

Adam: You know, one of the ongoing conversations in the Ministry Collaborative is connecting daily lived, real-world experience with theological and spiritual depth, and how in many of our traditions, those things are often pulled apart in ways that are unhelpful. Thrown into the midst of this is a recent interview with Dr. Sarah Coakley, who some may know is a Anglican theologian and has also taught here in the States quite a bit, and was interviewed in the *New York Times* by Peter Wehner. The last paragraph of that interview struck me as having some relevance to that ongoing conversation, and I've been looking forward to discussing it with you all. She says,

*"Unless we can regenerate the depth of theological tradition alongside the depth of spiritual transformation, I think our churches deserve to be empty. And I find in the youngest generation this great longing for substance, for real theological substance and real ascetical demand. People want their lives to be changed. They don't want a lightweight cultural Christianity with a lot of politics linked to it. They're looking for the real thing. And if I have any impact on that for the rest of my days, I shall be pleased."*

Leah: I hear this as a call to discipleship, the work of being changed by God as we do life with one another. We see this in the Acts 2 church, where they list all the things that the early church did, right? They had everything in common. They gathered together, they broke bread, they fellowshipped, they met each other's needs, they gathered around the apostles' preaching and teaching, having everything in common, and God added to their number, right? So they were being changed as the world was being changed in community with God. That's what I hear. What I don't hear is the bifurcation, right?

I don't hear, "Well, let's take a part of our lived experience and not touch that in the community of faith."

Jennifer Watley Maxell: And what Coakley says in her article, what she pushes for, is this contemplative spirituality, spirituality that is rooted in our contemplative practices of presence with the Divine. And she really lays out that the result of a contemplative practice is this inner-driven perspective, what we might call "discernment", about what is good and what is just and what is right and what is holy; that we're not looking simply to sacred Scriptures for answers, and we're not leaning into, kind of, the cultural

moment. I think it's interesting that she then caps the article with that quote where she kind of says, "setting politics aside."

Beth: For me, it's what are we preaching from the pulpit? What are we teaching in those areas of practical theology and faith formation? Where is our hope? And I think when our hope is wholly on one political party or even a political issue, I think that's the thing that people are pushing back on, because our hope is so much bigger than Democrat or Republican. Like, it's so much bigger than the American political system. And yet all of us are being roped into how do we speak to politics when everyone just wants to put us in those boxes and name us as, "You're this," or "You're that"?

How do we speak into politics when we know that people in the pews are trying to work out who we vote for and what do we believe, and then think they know everything about us based on that one thing? Like, how do we address politics and make it so much bigger than the American political system? Because ultimately, our hope is not in that. Neither party, in this system, is not going to fix it. That doesn't mean we don't participate in it wholly. But gosh, what a difficult task that is when you know all the junk and the judgment that people are bringing into church, and the anxiety of it.

Adam: Yeah. I think the task for any congregation is to ask the question of, "how do we stay engaged with the world around us from a deeper place of spiritual transformation?", so that the witness looks like, "Oh, wow, that's a people who stays engaged with charity and justice and policy, but from a deeper place, from a well of spiritual resilience and capacity."

Jennifer: Yeah. So I grew up in a traditional Black church framework. What I mean is that it was very conservative, evangelical even, I would say, in terms of the preaching and teaching, but it was a liberation theology. I think that there are circles for which liberation theology is seen as progressive and anti-evangelical. I don't think we bring politics in. I don't think that we preach about the American political system and parties and all that. I think that is the death, and I don't think that is holy. However, the Bible has a lot to say about justice and feeding people, not just Americans, all over the world. There are people who are starving, and there are people who are on the margins, and there are people who are spiritually bereft, and there are powers and principalities that are oppressing and suppressing people all over the world. That's what I mean when I'm talking about bringing all of us in.

It's not to say that we're going to get up and have a conversation about the issues of our time and who's on the ballot and what we're talking about, but I think it is recognizing that the Gospel in its truest form is a very political thing, and it has ramifications in all parts of our lives. And I think sometimes people use not being willing to go there politically as a scapegoat for not talking about what the Gospel does talk about.

Adam: In y'all's experience as ministers in different contexts, have you seen people engage with a contemplative practice or spiritual discipline that has better equipped them with this sort of lens? In other words, not one that's escapist, but have you seen someone go deeper in their own spiritual life and the result be they're more engaged with the world around them? I think that's where the best of our traditions are, but I want to know what that actually looks like in 2026.

Leah: For me, what comes to mind is Bible study connected with an outward sign pointing to service. My pastor always says, "Teach people where you want them to go." I think what's in question, and what's in dispute, is where we want people to go. In my tradition, where we want people to go is from an understanding of the Gospel that is outlined in not only Scripture, but the revelation of God to you

directly, that helps you understand how you're supposed to show up and live that out in the world. So, if Jennifer was my pastor and I heard her interpreting Scripture and the Word of God in such a way that we are called to take care of the least, the lost, and the left out, that me living that out faithfully pushes me to participate in that work, whether I am coming alongside folks that are actively feeding, whether or not I am advocating for people to be fed and against things that keep people from being fed and housed and taken care of. That also, then, gives me a lens through which I evaluate leaders in charge who make decisions that will either result in people being well taken care of or not. So then, it does affect what I check when I go into the voting booth, all back to my understanding of who God is, who Christ is, what that calls me to be, and then what that calls me to do.

Beth: I completely agree, Leah. And I think this is what we need in the churches in terms of leadership: is neither reducing the Gospel to just a commentary on what's happening in the world, nor being so afraid to tell those stories that have huge implications for how we live our life and how we vote and how we raise our children and how we engage with one another. But sadly, and I think Coakley's right about this, so many of our churches don't do that, and we have to get back to that, because we're losing people not because they're not interested in Jesus, because they can get that commentary elsewhere. As you say, what we're doing is pointing to something that is so bigger than ourselves, but has huge implications for each and every one of us.

Leah: And I think part of how we got here is for so long, segments of believers were taught and allowed to believe that this was all about belief, that there was no lived, outward reality of faith in Jesus Christ. And what I hear Coakley saying that the culture and present generations are calling for is to throw that out the window and get to a place — or back to a place — where this is more than just a intellectual exercise, where I can say I believe something and it doesn't show up on Monday morning after Sunday at 11am.

Adam: Yeah. The very concrete example of this that comes to mind: our congregation here partners with multiple schools in the area where the majority of students are on free and reduced lunches. And so, one of the things that we are constantly doing at this congregation is packing lunches. Even right after worship, oftentimes in the narthex, after a very traditional Presbyterian liturgy, my kids know that, at least one or two Sundays a month, they walk out of the sanctuary, and there's just tables to pack stuff. So for them, there's no difference between "I had to sit through this worship service and pray and sing, and then I walk out and we get busy." And it's not a next-week thing, it's right now.

Jennifer: To go to that last point, about young people, I think those are the type of practices that young people are interested in in terms of deepening their faith, being able to see the outward manifestation and witness. And I think we need to name that particularly American Christianity has had a really horrible 50 years. I mean, when you look at all of the falls from grace that have been in the news, like, there's been a lot of bad press that the American church in particular has gotten. I'm not saying it's wrong, I'm just saying there's a lot of bad press. And for young people who have been brought up in the age where they are seeing people of faith routinely taken down, I think it's had an effect. So, I think their desire for proof in the pudding, if you will, like, "We don't want to just know that you're a pastor. We don't want to just know that you're in this position. We don't want to just know that you're somebody that goes to church every week. We want to see that you have the heart of God." I think there's good reason why they are asking those questions, and that is what they're interested in at this particular time.

Leah: We can feed the hungry as an act of community service. And so, I think that's the other piece, right? There is a command to reattach practice to faith where it had become so detached, right? Works righteousness we were cautioned against, right? And so I'm hearing that as well in these practices.

And I think at the end of the day, to get to what Coakley is calling us to is going to require us to resist a great deal of temptation. *The Message* translation of Romans 12:2 that says, "Don't become so well-adjusted to the culture that you fit in without even thinking about it."

To do and respond faithfully to what the people reference, the young people, the generation, even older people who sit in a place where they're like, "This is no longer faithful to me." To get to that place, there's a whole lot of things that we need to say "no" to, that we need to let go of and turn away from and turn towards. And that is an act of resistance.

Beth: This has been the most uplifting. Like, I haven't heard Jesus talk this much in so long in the right way. I mean, really, we keep talking…we've said it so many times: the church has everything it needs, and for some reason it keeps diluting it down with what's shiny and what seems attractional. And I'm so tired over the years of churches saying, "This is what young people want." And I think what the Coakley quote is telling us, multiple studies that we've highlighted on the podcast and on the blog are telling us: young people want depth. Young people want authenticity. They don't want perfection, but they do want authenticity. They want mystery. And isn't that Christ, and Christ crucified? Isn't that all we have to offer? And so yes, all of the things.

I loved what you said, Leah, of that the church needs to do all of this social outreach and works. It absolutely needs to, but it has to be from a place of faith in Jesus and hope in Jesus, because without that, there are so many other organizations, honestly, can do it better, because that's the only thing they do. We're trying to help people live differently by being followers as well as leaders. And that is just such a unique call, and we can't do it unless we offer Christ.

Leah: I think part of what we've done has gotten detached from the Gospel.

Beth: Absolutely.

Leah: And, you know, people still need to hear that story, and see that story lived out through us.