

Episode 3: Central Avenue, Middletown

Part One—More Than the Single Story

Megan DeWald: In 2009, writer Chimamanda Adichie gave a TedTalk called “The Danger of a Single Story.” If you haven’t watched or listened to it, um, go do that. I’ll wait... So, in this TedTalk, Chimamanda addresses the common inclination that people have to hear just one story—one voice, one perspective—of a community or culture or identity—and then to assume that that one story is *the* story of that whole community or culture or identity.

The people of Middletown, Ohio, know this well. In 2016, a memoir called *Hillbilly Elegy* that was set in Middletown topped *The New York Times’* best-seller list and garnered breathless reviews about how it explained so-called “Middle America” to the so-called “Coastal Elites.” It’s the second part of the sub-title of the book that really makes the bold claim, which is “A memoir of a family” (so far, so good) “and culture in crisis.” *A culture in crisis?* I’ll grant you that J.D. Vance’s memoir of his family is powerful and compelling, and there’s even a movie of it now on Netflix. But the idea that Vance’s story of his family—his single story—could fully explain the complexities of an entire community—the entirety of “Middle America”? Nah, I don’t buy it.

The truth is, of course, much more nuanced than Vance’s portrayal of this post-industrial town, that sits about midway between Cincinnati and Dayton in southwestern Ohio. On Central Avenue in this Middletown you’ll find the 201-year-old First Presbyterian Church, with its motto: “Celebrating God’s love in the middle of town.” It’s a place full of stories. An average Sunday typically brings 150-200 people to worship, including many retired steel executives and their families, most of whom commute in now from the suburbs. Steel was big business in Middletown throughout the 1900s, with a major plant in town providing a large percentage of the good jobs for residents, along with some paper mills and a local economy that blossomed around this industry. In 1957, the National Civic League designated Middletown an “All American City,” and in the 1960s, First Presbyterian Church had around 2,000 people on its membership rolls.

But in the 70s, 80s, 90s—industrialism, the economic system fueled by manufacturing—began its now infamous decline. Jobs went overseas where labor was cheaper, and technological advances minimized the cost—and need—for human power. And today, Middletown is still trying to find its footing. Those who had the resources to relocate to the suburbs have done so, leaving the residents of Middletown to navigate its reimagining and revitalization, while unemployment remains relatively high, the opioid crisis is wreaking havoc, and the public school system is under-resourced and under-performing. But in the midst of this, First Presbyterian Church is committed to being a congregation that is more outward-looking, truly hearing, seeing, and reckoning with the community in which they’re rooted—and figuring out how to love their neighbors.

Welcome to *Disrupting Ministry*, a podcast from the Institute for Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary. I’m Megan DeWald. In this podcast, we bring you stories of faith communities who are disrupting the status quo in the Church by developing innovative forms of ministry with young people. In this episode, we introduce you to First Presbyterian Church in Middletown, Ohio, and their vision to serve



pop-up hospitality to young people in their community through overflowing tables of welcome and belonging.

Part Two—The Ghost of Youth Ministry Past

Abigail Rusert: Churches all over this country are, are looking at youth programs and desiring to rebuild something that is long past. And this is not, I mean, any youth minister listening to that is rolling their eyes, because thank you, you know, Princeton Seminary’s podcast for telling us what we already knew.

Megan: That’s the Rev. Abigail Visco Rusert, Director of the Institute for Youth Ministry, who was reflecting on the application we received from First Pres Middletown for the Log College Project, our grant initiative that has us working with 12 churches from around the country as they design, test, and implement new forms of youth ministry in their contexts.

The application came from the church’s Christian Education Director Lisa Kaufer, who articulated so well a very common desire we see in many congregations and that she was witnessing in hers—the longing to go back, to return to a time (sometimes fabled, sometimes real) when the church was crawling with young people.

Abigail: But she, she goes on to say the pieces in our current program have no resemblance of that past. And we feel like, you know, through this project, we have the opportunity basically to try new things. So, I think, um, what stood out is that she was clearly a leader who was game, who had some agency who, who perceived that she could talk about failure and probably has talked about failure with her boss. And those are, are huge leadership qualities that we think are important for, um, a congregation who's going to take on that work of, of throwing out, um, ideas that would challenge this sacred cow of, um, the sacred cow being like “the way we've always done it.” Right? And we knew we needed a leader who had th-, the tenacity to do that and could see those deeper underlying problems.

Megan: It probably comes as no shock to anyone that the relationship between the senior pastor of a church and the person charged with its youth ministry is a critical relationship. In the IYM’s work over the past 25 years, we’ve heard all the variations on this seemingly eternal struggle—the senior pastor who used to be a youth director and so (ahem) knows everything; the senior pastor who’s terrified of teenagers and is like a deer-in-headlights around them; the inexperienced youth director who doesn’t understand why it’s such a big deal that the stained-glass window got broken during a rogue game of kickball in the sanctuary; and all the rest—the power struggles, the budget struggles (which are kind of the same thing), the “you don’t understand how hard my job is” struggles, and the perennial “this is the way we’ve always done it” struggles. So, we knew intuitively that we had to partner with someone in a youth director role who had worked hard to cultivate a healthy relationship with her senior pastor and had developed a good rapport with the congregation, so that she could give and receive critical feedback, and could be trusted and empowered to have agency in the project. And we found that person in Lisa.

Abigail: So, she may have been hired—this is where, Megan, you and I talk all the time about this. I think it's your quote. You say “the job does not equal the work” in youth ministry. (*Mhmm*) And so, the job that she was hired for, which is to like, I mean, what are the, what's the job that most youth ministers are hired for? Come in and save our church by filling our pews with young people (*Mhmm*), because someday those young people will turn into old people, who will baptize their kids at this congregation who will, um, tithe. (*Right*) It's an, these are old attractional models, right? And so, maybe that, nobody at



her church said that that was her job on paper right now, I'm, I'm giving, I'm sort of spanning out to a challenge that a lot of senior pastor staff, let alone, you know, youth pastors, but she's questioning that and saying, "Our, our ministry actually—the content of my ministry—is pretty relational. And, um, and I see that as something that's really, really important, and we know we need new models, but we just need, like, a roadmap to get there." So, we saw her as a leader who is going to be able to come in and, and really have the agency in her context and the passion and the understanding of what we were trying to do to be able to make it happen.

Megan: I spoke with Lisa, who became the Design Fellow for the church, and asked her what had been a key learning from the Log College Project that had been useful for her context, as she sought to move the youth ministry away from that attractional model and redirect that energy around "the way we've always done it" toward something new.

Lisa Kaufer: Permission to fail again and again and again. I just, I think that was really liberating, the first liberating, the first time that we heard it was, um, you know, from the, the voice of Princeton is that we expect you to fail, and it's okay! And learn, we will learn from that failure, and fail forward is a thing, you know, and just, um, that is, that is not our culture. And so to, you know, to, to really benefit the innovation process or the design process, um, you have to embrace that value, or it doesn't work. So, that continues to stay with me, and I celebrate it and have since also heard the phrase, let's see, fail, 'fail quickly and succeed sooner.' And so, um, knowing that it's, it's really one experiment after another and taking what you learned from that and moving forward.

Megan: For the record, I think, uh, I love that you are equating, or get now to equate the voice of Princeton saying, um, "Fail. Failure's okay. We expect it. Um, you're going to learn and move on." That you're equating that with Princeton because, uh, you know, it's, it's actually something we're all learning here on the ground too.

Megan: Ok, so I may have been a little surprised by her answer because, on the ground here at Princeton Seminary—as I imagine true for many, many places—we don't usually talk about failure being, you know, our brand. But Abigail wasn't surprised that this was Lisa's takeaway at all. In fact, she had built lessons on failure right into framework for the Log College Project.

Abigail: Innovation basically necessitates failure on some level. You have to, like, actually try things, and we're just going to *assume* that they're not going to work, out of the gates, when you're, when you're in... I'm speaking directly from human-centered design thinking, uh, that design thinking process assumes that there will be levels of failure that you navigate as you move to something that might work in your context.

Megan: So, perhaps the time has come for us to re-brand "failure" in the church. In a time when church membership is in decline and young people aren't flocking to our doors (or Zoom rooms, in the Covid-era), perhaps it's time for us to release our vise-like grip on "the way we've always done it," and instead embrace failure as a kind of virtue of the innovation process; as a kind of gift, even. Or as Lisa put it, as a kind of way we can play together.

Lisa: A word of encouragement that I would share is to remember how important it is to play... ~~When we are faced with change or crisis. Um, we can really be paralyzed by that.~~ And I really feel that in my experience in learning about innovation and design thinking, it's really an invitation to play. Um, when we



let go of that fear of failure, and when we're not so latched on to, 'this thing has to be successful,' we are invited to just see what happens, to imagine, to wonder, to laugh. Um, and that is so life-giving. And so, I feel that it's so important to give ourselves permission to let go of the expectations. There is no "normal." And so, um, let's create something new.

Part Three—Safe Space

Megan: When First Pres Middletown was invited to participate in the cohort of 12 churches in the Log College Project, they had already been doing a lot of work to understand their context better and were in the midst of identifying some major shifts they wanted to make as a church.

Lisa: We knew that our church and our community were, um, experiencing some, some significant changes; and particularly, our church was navigating, uh, a paradigm shift. Um, for example, trying to lean more into ministering *with*, and not just providing programs; wanting to reorient from looking inward and looking outward instead. Um, also knowing that oftentimes in church context, uh, we have many ministries functioning, somewhat independently, maybe as silos, and so wanting to shift from programmatic silos towards more intergenerational engagement. And so, we had already started doing some of the work of, um, trying to understand, you know, our history and, uh, and, and what we were experiencing in the present time and beginning to ask questions about what comes next.

Megan: But rather than just taking stabs in the dark and spending all kinds of money and time developing more programs that might just go live and die in another ministry silo, First Pres began to dedicate resources to the intentional practice of listening to the community. In fact, separate from the Log College Project, the church actually hired someone to serve as an official Community Listener, charged with the task of attending to what people in the church and the community were really saying, and then feeding that information back into the life of the church.

Lisa: As we were listening to the youth voices in our congregation and community, we continued to hear the need for a safe space; um, that it was something that was not always easily found, but once people experienced it, it was so life-giving and, um, and it just, uh, kept them coming back.

Megan: The term "safe space" has all kinds of definitions, depending on who's doing the defining, but many people trace the term's roots to the LGBT community in the 1960s, when places that strove to be physically and psychologically safe for queer folks to be "out" designated themselves as "safe space." Today, the term can refer to places where other groups of people who are oppressed or marginalized can be themselves, free from violence, harassment, or discrimination. But sometimes the term is much more broadly applied and simply means, somewhere someone can go and just be who they are. And, well, let's face it—the church doesn't have a great track record of being these kinds of safe spaces where people can just be who they are. Our mission statements might claim that we welcome everybody, and we might even have a sign or flag or symbol outside our doors to signify to people what we mean by "everybody." But true hospitality and welcome aren't just words and symbols—they're attitudes and actions. And at First Pres, part of the action was realizing that ministry in Middletown meant leaving the comfort of the building to go out and cultivate safe space in the community.



Lisa: But we also recognize that sometimes coming to a church can be a stumbling block for welcome. It's hard to say that, but, um, we wanted to take the safe space, um, outwardly and, um, be where people are gathering already and be with them in whatever it was that they were experiencing.

Megan: As part of the Log College Project, Lisa formed an intergenerational Design Team, and the relationships that began to form between members of that team forged new insights into the relationship between the church and the community. Many adults in the congregation, for instance, didn't realize that many of the young people who are connected to First Pres and who live in Middletown itself experience poverty, food insecurity, lack of transportation, and mental health struggles, along with navigating academic pressures and questions of identity. The deeper the team dug into these insights, the more convinced the team grew of the need for safe space in the community that was outside of the church. And they were further inspired by a couple of ideas that they'd heard of in other places.

Lisa: We also knew that, uh, one of our Eagle Scouts had, um, a project creating a "buddy bench." Many people might be familiar with that space on a playground, where there's a bench where if you are waiting to play and want to be invited to play, you could sit there, and folks would know that that's a signal that you are looking for someone to spend some time with, hang out with.

And so, it was kind of like, "Oh, the purple buddy bench." It's probably important to share that purple is the color of our local school district, and so that's where the color purple comes in. So, we thought of the purple buddy benches, and, um, some folks may also be familiar with the Turquoise Table that started in Austin, Texas, um, as someone was wanting to, um, become more neighborly, put the table out in their front yard instead of, um, congregating in the backyard all the time. And that, that really invited people into conversation. And so, it was kind of this merging of, of recognizing the importance of "safe space" and welcome and making it as easy as possible.

And so that's really kind of how that story started weaving together was, um, hearing, hearing those needs and trying to find a way, um, to create that space in a new way.

Megan: All of these needs and ideas were swirling around the minds of the Design Team members as they made their way to the Design Lab, where we brought together all the Design Teams from all 12 churches in the Log College Project to the campus of Princeton Seminary for various workshops, trainings, and other special events, all geared toward helping the teams hone their ministry ideas and develop the skills and tools to launch them on their return home. On the plane ride over, Lisa was reading the book by Kristin Schell called *The Turquoise Table*, and she was inspired by the simplicity of the idea and yet the profound way that a simple idea could build community and connection with one's neighbors by reimagining the concept of space—moving from the culturally-sanctioned, private, invitation-only space of the backyard to a more public, visible, and somewhat unconventional space of the front yard as a site of welcome and hospitality.

But the team didn't just want to put a brightly colored table on the church's front lawn and hope for the best; they knew that they needed to be more mobile than that, to be able to show up in different places in the community more strategically and to claim that space as safe—and even sacred—for those who were there. And so, combining all this, the team landed their idea.

Lisa: The vision of the Purple Table is a pop-up welcoming space that can go to different places in the community for community-building, affirmation, healing. And we were recognizing that, um, we wanted to create a space that served people in this way, um, where we could build relationships without rigid



expectations around identity. Um, and so we kind of imagined a few different scenarios where, um, it might feel good for this Purple Table to pop up.

We called it a pop-up welcome feast. And, um, and really a lot of that concept comes from, um, practicing our faith and the idea of a welcome table, and we are all welcome at the table. And, um, but it was not meant to be a feast in the way that, that we probably imagine a feast. It was, it was, uh, a feast of relationship and a feast of welcome. And yes, there were probably going to be some fun snacks and things like that, um, because food brings people together, but it, but the food piece was not a requirement of the Purple Table, I'd say.

Megan: Of course, the curve ball of the COVID pandemic has also shifted the vision for this project for First Pres, but it's also provided some new avenues to reimagine what it means to create pop-up hospitality that meets people where they are.

Lisa: In March, we were ready to equip volunteers and physically take the Purple Table to a local park and host a big party for the community as our kickoff. Um, and that was in March, and just within the span of a couple of weeks, um, we knew that that reality and the timing, it, it did not mesh. And so, uh, we just sort of said, what if the Purple Table pops up in a different way online, at least for now? And so, we started playing with that kind of space, um, and having Bible study and book clubs and our compassion camp, our intergenerational compassion camp over the summer. Um, even one of our, our groups of faithful knitters that would typically meet in the local coffee shop, it was obvious that that that time they were not able to meet physically, and so we started hosting a Zoom space for that as well. And it's just been deeply enriching to, to keep these relationships in a new way. It's, it's almost more meaningful because, um, when we are physically together, I think a lot of times we can take that for granted. And so, it just sort of puts everything into perspective. And so, we've been playing with this online space and inviting people into it and learning from it. And we'll see where we go from here.

Part Four—The Practice of Prophetic Listening

Megan: Throughout this project, we've been conducting research by listening to the stories and perspectives of the people in these churches, hoping that the patterns and themes that emerge might provide insight for other faith leaders who are passionate about youth ministry. For First Pres Middletown, we recruited our friend, Kelsey Lambright, to serve as the researcher, and we also gave her the role of being the Lead Researcher on the team because of the way this project dovetailed with her ongoing interests as a scholar.

Kelsey Lambright: I'm Kelsey Lambright. I am a PhD candidate in practical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, studying Christian education and formation, and Abigail roped me in to being the lead researcher for the Log College Project. So, I have been, uh, overseeing the research of our research team and walking alongside all 12 of these churches for the past few years.

Megan: Kelsey grew up in a Christian community where, she says, she didn't really experience much spiritual formation in the youth group as a young person.

Kelsey: I ended up going to the adult Bible study at the time, and that has largely influenced my academic research regarding the church as a whole, especially faith formation and faith formation of young people,



as well as adults. So, this, this project, the Log College Project, uh, is near and dear to my heart, thinking about how youth are being formed and shaped through the church. And if that's actually a meaningful, faithful experience for them.

Megan: One of the things I think we in the church implicitly teach young people when we insist on doing things the way we've always done them—often thereby ignoring or downplaying the gifts and agency of young people—is that they don't really matter, except insofar as they keep the machine of our church running. Like Abigail said earlier, we've grown complacent with a model of youth ministry that simply views young people as a remedy to save our churches—getting those attendance numbers up because those young people will probably grow into older people who will tithe, and they'll baptize their kids in this congregation who will grow into older people who will tithe. And, so on and so forth. Honestly, it's a terrible business model, let alone a theological nightmare.

But this is how we've decided to do it, and this is the job description we've settled for with our youth ministers. This is why we've kind of adopted a slogan at the Institute for Youth Ministry that we're repeating: that the quote-unquote job doesn't equal the work. So, when Kelsey observed how Lisa was able to form a team who could get busy with the actual work of youth ministry, it began to transform the entire congregation.

Kelsey: This idea of the Purple Table, of bringing the, the table of the church out into the community really is a result of them following the youth's heart for the people of Middletown. And that, I sense that the congregation, that the leadership of the church, has really learned to pay attention to the passions of the young people. The young people care about the people in Middletown who, um, don't have enough food, don't have enough money to support themselves at a very basic level, who, um, are viewed as lesser-than in the community because they identify as LGBTQ. Uh, and, and that's really what is on the young people's heart. And I would say that that's on what's, that's, what's on God's heart. And that then the, the church as a whole has gotten swept up into this passion and has taken that out with this Purple Table idea.

Megan: Kelsey was also inspired by the intentional practice of prophetic listening that First Pres Middletown employed in their community, even hiring someone to do that work, and then allowing that practice to inform how the church reimagines its ministries.

Kelsey: It's something that I'm familiar with as a kind of practice, especially as I've studied missional leadership and some of the ideas of paying attention to how God is working in your community, but actually to hear of a church that was doing it, uh, and had, and had put money into something like that, that was surprising to me and encouraging as they also were working on re-imagining youth ministry.

I don't know if Lisa shared this, but, uh, right before they ended up coming to Princeton for the Design Lab, they didn't really have kind of a clear picture of what they were going to do. They didn't have an idea. They hadn't really narrowed it down. And there were a few of them from the Design Team in the room, not even all of them, but, uh, their young person was there and Lisa was there and a few others. And Lisa shared that that really was the moment. It was a "God moment" for them, a moment when there was significant, uh, prophetic listening happening that they discovered this idea of the Purple Table.

Megan: What other things has God been saying to the church through young people that we have failed to hear because of how we've constructed the institution of the church? We invited a youth ministry



scholar and friend of ours, Amanda Drury, to come preach at the Design Lab, and her impassioned sermon from the pulpit of Miller Chapel hinged on this obvious but often-disregarded truth: “There is no Holy Spirit Junior.” Agreed! That’s a god we’ve created in our own image. We’ve deluded ourselves and ignored the danger of the single story about what it means to do youth ministry well. Or as Lisa says:

Lisa: Middletown is full of stories. And, um, I think it's very important that we collect as many stories as we can when we're trying to understand, um, what it means for us to live in and share that community space together.

Kelsey: I think it's similar to maybe, to having, to building the right team. So, making sure that you built a draw people into your ministry that have different tendencies than you. This came up in my conversation with Lisa, um, this idea, and I told her that my tendency is, you know, just like toss it all out, start over, like just kind of revolutionary, like just light a match. (*Right*) And she, and she rightly, um, made, made note about being more pastoral. And, and this is, this is why Lisa is so wonderful. And I was like, Lisa, this is why you're a pastor. And she goes, “Oh, I'm not a pastor.” (*Hmm*). Um, because I mean, she's, she's a director there, of faith formation. Um, and I, and I told her, “No, Lisa (*Mm-hmm*) you're, you're a pastor.” Uh, and those gifts are so needed to know, to know when, how, like you said, how to walk that line.

Conclusion

Megan: Next week on *Disrupting Ministry*, I'll introduce you to our friends at Calvary Episcopal Church in Rochester, Minnesota, and you'll learn about how their unique context in a premiere medical destination has informed their dreams of connecting middle school students to one another and to the church.

Today's episode was written and recorded by me, Megan DeWald, and then, as always, Nii Addo Abrahams makes everything sound good as our audio editor and feel good as our friend. Special thanks to Maiia Avelino and Christine Toto for keeping the gears of this thing turning. To find out more about the Institute for Youth Ministry, visit our website at iym.ptsem.edu—and from there, click on the words that say Princeton Theological Seminary or visit directly at ptsem.edu. Until next week!