

Jim Keat ([00:00](#)):

Bishop Yvette Flunder is an American womanist preacher, pastor, activist and singer from San Francisco, California. She's the senior pastor of City of Refuge, United Church of Christ in Oakland, California, and the Presiding Bishop of the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. In this video, you'll hear a conversation between Cameron Trimble, the founder and CEO of Convergence and Bishop Flunder.

Cameron Trimble ([00:28](#)):

Bishop. It is great to get, get this time with you. You and I had a similar kind of conversation almost this time last year. And that was for the courageous faith summit. This is the greatest church summit and the world is completely different. I mean, it's stunning actually, what has happened in the time that has transpired? I know for me a lot has shifted from the simple things. Like I don't have to travel nearly, like I used to, but bigger things like this has sort of invited me into this kind of new monastic rhythm a repatterning of my life. And I could go on, but I'm wondering what has shifted for you what's happened in, within you in, in your, your life in general?

Yvette Flunder ([01:23](#)):

Well good to see you by the way. Thank you. In so many ways we have known one another and work together tearing down the systems of injustice for a number of years, and it is good to be a part of this conversation. I think that this conglomeration of issues that includes systemic problematic issues coming from Washington DC and the previous administration and folding into this pandemic and what it is costing in lives and jobs and peace and the realities of the diminishment of the product that is the United States of America, the diminishment of that reality across the world. And then connecting that to what I call bad religion, poor religion that is insisting on apocalyptic realities happening right now, if we don't vote for who they would want us to vote for, but the ways in which a common religion or a particularly ultra conservative and conservative religion has in some ways, gotten in bed with people and systems that are, seems to be, that seemed to be the enemies to people to the planet to justice.

Yvette Flunder ([03:03](#)):

So, so much that I can say to the end of racism and homophobia, xenophobia so much, I can say. So that is the time that we are living in. What is interesting about it is a perfect storm. It's all happening simultaneously. Now I'm, I've lived through lots of civil rights movements and lots of AIDS movements and gay rights movements and women's rights movements. But at least there was a little breathing room between one and the other. This time. It seems that it is all happening at once. And we are at home for the most part, working from our offices and our homes and our spots and our retreat centers and such. So I have never experienced anything quite like this. I could never have imagined the confluence of all of these realities at one time. That is what I'm feeling, but in the middle of it, I have a rather hard to explain peace not because I'm not surrounded constantly by crisis, but because somehow I think that we have come to a certain place where the divine is bringing forth a resurrection, our decomposition is giving way to recomposition.

Yvette Flunder ([04:27](#)):

In some ways, you know, recomposing the decompose, it's a Lazarus moment. It's it's at the tomb moment, something powerful in my Harry Potter lingo, something powerful this way comes. And that, that is what I believe in somehow my soul has been made excited in the midst of my quarantine and exile in some ways, from some of the things that I'm used to being close to. So that's sort of a capsule of what it is that I'm feeling right now,

Cameron Trimble ([05:03](#)):

Early on. I started wondering if this wasn't, I, I even started talking about this time is sort of, is a time of the great unveiling. You know, it was starting, it was revealing what was already, so about the world all already broken about the world already inequitable already unjust. And then it, as you, as you say it in this perfect storm almost as if, you know, in the old Testament tearing away of the veil, you know, so that we could see more clearly and I, it almost so I'm, I still don't quite know what I think of all this, right? So I'm, I'm thinking out loud here, but I I'm, I'm timidly wanting, wondering if this doesn't feel a bit like a, an evolutionary moment, this sort of awakening that's happening for the sake of all that is you know, living and loving in this world as if I mean, I think that it is true that the divine is showing up in a way that is waking us up, that, that we've been in some deep slumber that has been killing our souls, actually. Absolutely. I wonder too, how is your church faring through this as, you know, the pastor of city of refuge. And then of course you Bishop over a lot of churches, but I'm interested in your people, how are they, how are they?

Yvette Flunder ([06:39](#)):

I think that on a personal level and on an ecclesial level, in some ways reformation, reconstruction is happening personally, and it is certainly happening in our church. We have found that certain talents have risen to the top because they're just much better online than there were in person. Certain things that were wonderful in public are not as wonderful virtually I think that some of my colleagues, some of the larger churches are really feeling it because they are not able to gather their people in the ways in which they have they are not able to do the super-duper choreograph production worship services that they were able to do in the past, because it doesn't work that well through the medium of you know, zoom, even if it's megazoom, you know, it still just doesn't work the same. So for us, we had to do sort of like a quick study of how we were going to be virtually, but the beauty of it is I think that we had gotten to sort of the root of what constitutes real church to us and familial relationships and community relationships.

Yvette Flunder ([08:02](#)):

We had gotten to that before the epidemic and the pandemic hit, and this being both the pandemic of sickness and the pandemic of political sickness that was, you know, bearing down on us simultaneously. We, I think we had, we'd spent, we're coming up on 30 years now together as a congregation. And we spent a lot of years trying to determine what really matters. And, and one of the things that that happened for us during that time is that this model, as I call it of choreographed church, never did really work for us. We've always been kind of raggedy, you know, kinda messy around the edges. So, you know, having to figure out how to function when you have really found out how to do incredible raggedness is, is easier I think, for our, our kinds of congregations.

Yvette Flunder ([09:05](#)):

And I find the same to be true, true throughout the Fellowship. We just kind of get in where we fit in. You know, you have to shift and change things a bit when you're not stuck, you know and not being stuck is a real part of what the heart of the Fellowship is. One of the reasons we don't have a book of rules and order is because we're not a denomination, we're a fellowship of people from several denominations and non denominations, and some who, who identify as Christian. And some that identify as Christian as a part, perhaps of their faith paths and finding a way to be together. Something that was the crowning intention for us to be a fellowship. So it has made us flexible. We have, we were flexible by intention and it's working well in this time. I don't know that really much has changed. We

are very clear not wanting to bury people from COVID and for the most part to date, we have not, but it is because we could stop things, you know, we'll just stop and do something else until this death cloud blows over. You know flexibility is, inflexibility is the indicator that it's time for reformation. I'll go all the way to the end of this and say, that's what I'd be tweeting out right now. You know,

Cameron Trimble ([10:41](#)):

If you could tweet something to the whole church and everybody.

Yvette Flunder ([10:45](#)):

You know it's inflexibility that calls to and for reformation is when we become so concretized and solidified, you know, and superglued to what it is that we do and how we do what we do then a wind of the spirit comes through and blows something completely different. We are, we who are the most capable, overnight become the least capable and the least capable overnight become the most capable. And the last shall be first and the first shall be last. I like what the writer says, it's the, Lord's doing yes. And it's marvelous in our eyes. So I would say that that is in many ways, a testimony I have in fact seen many of the churches who are affiliate with the Fellowship, both who are in Fellowship only, and some who are denominationally connected and fellowship with Fellowship as affiliate men, men, memberships, and affiliate churches and faith-based, and, and, and justice small businesses. There are several ways that people connect to us, the, the clergy within the theological institutions, as you know the way in which we are connected has been a lifeline because we had to be connected in that raggedy way. Anyway.

Cameron Trimble ([12:13](#)):

Yeah. And it sounds to me like the one thing that is concretized that you've spent 30 years setting in place is no matter what your connection to each other is the most important, how that happens, that, you know, can be reinvented constantly, but that's the non-negotiable,

Yvette Flunder ([12:35](#)):

That's exactly right. You know, we, we are, those of us who are denominational, people are connected to circumstances where they say, well, if you're in this, you can't be in that. Or we say, well, you can be in the Fellowship if you want.

Cameron Trimble ([12:49](#)):

Yeah. We don't have a problem with it. Okay.

Yvette Flunder ([12:54](#)):

Oh, and that's the beauty of it, you know, it's the beauty and, and, and, you know, I'm from San Francisco. You've heard me say this before, and I know about earthquakes. And I do know that when there's a good one, the first thing that falls off is the facades, because the facades are just there for is the old folks in my community used to say for floor showing just floorshow and, you know, just to look like it's something beautiful, but it can't withstand an earthquake. It falls off first. What remains is the infrastructure. And if you have built with only the facade in mind, the whole building will be destroyed. But if it's got a good framework, if it's got something that will hold it, the thing that connects to the foundation, that is what will stand, it'll sway. It will move, but it will still be there.

Yvette Flunder ([13:50](#)):

Then you can slap another facade on that later on. You know, I say that about the way that I believe is the heart of the church. I believe that what are the principles that call us together to be in many ways, the people of God, by any name, God is still God, the way in which we are called together to be children of the divine. The divine of our understanding is the framework just about everything else. How are you baptized? How many times you go in, what'd you say over the top of people, that communion, what all was, you know, all of those things shift and change with time and place and circumstances. I think we're going back, Reverend Cameron. I think we're going back to the framework because it is at that place where we see God and good. And it's that place where we have common denominator

Cameron Trimble ([14:52](#)):

It seems too Uh we were living under the illusion or delusion that part of the framework was a building. And, and now what we're realizing is that some buildings are useful. Some are not, but, but that the framework is something else. It's that connection. It's those relationships. It's that way we embody this love that we're called to embody in the world.

Yvette Flunder ([15:22](#)):

You become the temple when we are the temple, not building, not the mortar. If we are the temple, we're portable,

Cameron Trimble ([15:32](#)):

It's quite handy, the better designed framework, isn't it. Right. I love it. You as in serving as a Bishop of the Fellowship people look to you for vision and in this moment of radical disorientation, I can imagine that you know, you were called upon to, to, and you continue to be called upon to help point the way what, what feels like something important that we should all be tuning into, or that you're telling your leaders, you know, Hey, we've come this far. We've, we've learned this much. Now let's pay attention to this next step or this next thing, or what's in your spirit that says, this is the thing to watch.

Yvette Flunder ([16:29](#)):

Well, again, to be largely a little bit on this, there's very close to my heart in it. I have telegraphed to the churches and affiliates of, of the Fellowship for a month or two sort of getting us ready for our coming out of exile. Certainly very different than the way we went in. James 1:27, it says good religion and undefiled, you know, or not undermined is that we care for the widows and orphans who were the, of course, the most dispossessed disregarded of that time, the history of the diaconate. And it comes from caring for the widows and orphans, but then we would care for the widows and orphans and stay unspotted from the world, from, from the systems of the world. Right? Good religion suggest that we would care for the dispossessed as a priority, and that we would do it in a way that reflects the kingdom of God, not the systems of the world.

Yvette Flunder ([17:37](#)):

And so our theme began to be, have you got good religion? You know not, not have they got good religion, but have you, have you got good religion? And we, again, connected that to the statistics that we knew would eventually come out, came out in the last couple of days, even more so about the absence of people from organized religion. The numbers are staggering from just, a few years ago, gone from 75%, you know, to less than half of people who identify with it. And I, I lift that up because I think

that there has been an an abdicating of, of moral authority that once existed in these realities because Christianity and many other religions in other places, but Christianity in this country in particular has suggested that you have to get in the bed with evil in order to do good.

Yvette Flunder ([18:45](#)):

And that's a good as they perceive it. That is a very problematic position to take and say that you are a follower of the Brown, Palestinian Jew from Nazareth. How does that work? What do we do to him? What did we make out of him? And how can we make him the harbinger in some way of what it is that we are saying as is being said on that behalf from Christians and they're young people and they're young adults, and they're thinking people are cutting them loose. So then we have to ask the same question. It's the denomination that we are both a part of and denominations that we both work with. Have we got good religion and I've had to ask the Fellowship, okay, let's slow up a minute and take a real good look. Why do we even go to church?

Yvette Flunder ([19:43](#)):

What, what is communion? What is the supper? What is the purpose of these seven different baptisms in the church? What, why are we doing this? Does it have to be a small wafer glued to the top of a small plastic cup? Or can it be a muffin and a cup of coffee at Starbucks? I mean, what is the difference?

Cameron Trimble ([20:09](#)):

You are meddling now.

Yvette Flunder ([20:11](#)):

Oh, I know I am. Good religion or are, we just, people are creatures of practice. Is it helping anybody? Is anybody really literally being helped? So that is where we are. And we have asked ourselves some really hard questions, really hard. Can you do Holy work and be away from the institutions. And if so, then what is the purpose of the institution, right? What, where and how does it help? Let's name it? So our facades can drop off, you know, and that's, it's been quite something.

Cameron Trimble ([20:56](#)):

I bet itUm yeah. The wondering that the reason we chose to name this courageous church conference is because it's those provocative questions that it feels like now, if ever they're going to be asked, it should be now, you know, that, that so I want to know have you come to conclusions that have shocked you, or that do feel just radical? Because what I'm, what I'm hearing is that your community likely, because they know they will always belong. There's this no threat of being expelled for different thinking, you know, or wondering differently. Can we give up the communion wafer in favor of the muffin and coffee and some places that gets you banished, you know, even imagining such a thing, what you've created as a safety of space, that then is the antidote to the poverty of imagination that I think has plagued our institutions for so long.

Cameron Trimble ([22:03](#)):

So to that extent, like, well, I've got two competing questions in my head. One is have you come across something that people said, Oh, no, you can't touch that. And then you thought, well, why can't we touch that? You know, but it was like this reaction of, you know, Oh no, you can't, you know, not wear the robe and vestments or something, you know, that's nostalgic probably. Is there that, and then is

there some other, is there any other wisdom that you've gleaned from that, that maybe other congregations or denominations could overhear that would help provoke them for thinking

Yvette Flunder ([22:40](#)):

Well, in my own musing, yes. And in my chats, you know, I have sort of concluded that people gather together for just a few common reasons, right? Some people gathered together because they all fear the same thing. You know, whether that is a fear of the other, you're like a white supremacist group that gathers together because they fear that the other is going to take their power or that the other is going to diminish them in some way, or, you know um. People gathered together because they have a common joy, like they liked football, or they like basketball or a certain concert, you know, a certain vocal group. They gathered together with joy. I think that as I lift that up, because it's not always positive and it's not always negative, but it is common. There's something that, that group of people wants to gather together for.

Yvette Flunder ([23:52](#)):

I think that the, the thing that I most am trying to sort of hone down is what are the positive powerful life-giving things that can excite us to gather together, not just because we are, are, apocalyptically afraid, but well, gather us together, really sister, just because we want to be together. I want to be with you. I want my shoulder to rub up against your shoulder. And I want, I want to give you a high five when I see you and I want to be in your company, what is it that we can create that we want to be a part of that is not fear-based or not other-based? Do you know what I mean? When I say other-based that we have to hide in this hidey hole that we're in, because all the rest of the world is attacking like us, what, what is the wide open field where we can be together and find ways.

Yvette Flunder ([25:01](#)):

And I think we have yet to really hone down what that is when it is for something and not against something. But when we can really talk about what is the for-something that we want to gather, I believe that we will eliminate the negative energy that makes the enemy more important than the friend. Yes. I want to be with you. Not because I don't like them. I just want to be with you because I want to be with you. Because I enjoy the discourse, the planning, the, the potential, there's something beautiful about it. There's, there's, that's the food that our cells, our minds, our souls, our bodies, we need that right now. We've been in the war too long. And that is what the church in my thinking should afford us. That is, if there were a prescription, it would be the wide open tent and the trouble would be not who can sit here, but how can we get some more chairs and some more tables and expand this thing and make it broader and wider, more accessible.

Yvette Flunder ([26:36](#)):

I see that in my vision and season as the church. And that is what I am working. Even if we have to call it something, doesn't, it doesn't just include the few small things you can do when you get prepared to do it. You know, like you got to get it, you gotta get ordained. You know, you got it. You know what I mean? You got to go through committee on it, the committee a and you got this and you got to do that vote. Well, you know, when do we add holiness to people who put paint to canvas or people who are plant mothers and plant fathers that know how to grow beautiful, healthy plants? When do we add it to people who know how to care for small children with special needs? You know, when, when do those things get elevated as high as when we are, when we put our robes on and we go out and we do what

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we do, you know, you know, when we, when we level the playing field about what ministry and service really look like through the eyes of the lens of God and good.

Yvette Flunder ([27:45](#)):

So there's, I know that I said, like, the songwriter says, you may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one, you know, some day you'll join me, I'll join you. And the world will live as one. I'm not waiting for the apocalypse. I don't, I don't even ascribe to it. What I am waiting for is the day in which my colleagues and I, and all of those who serve us and that we serve will bring the realm of

Yvette Flunder ([28:16](#)):

God, that kingdom come thy will be done on earth. Right there. That's a good stop. On earth. Is it at all possible? Yes. Yes. I believe that.