

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

The Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis uses her gifts as author activist, preacher, and public theologian towards creating an anti-racist, just and fully welcoming society in which everyone has enough. Dr. Lewis is the senior minister for public theology and transformation at Middle Collegiate Church in New York city. In this video, you'll hear a conversation between Cameron Trimble, the founder and CEO of Convergence and Jacqui Lewis.

Speaker 2 ([00:30](#)):

It is spectacular actually to, to reconnect with you and to get to have this conversation you have a new book coming out, which is really exciting. You have lived through heaven and hell on steroids this past year. So we want to talk about that. So my God, what a ride, but I want to start just by saying how grateful I am that you you are doing what you do in the world, that we are connected in that doing and that you just inspire me in, in ways that I will never be able to language, but I'm just really grateful.

Speaker 3 ([01:11](#)):

I am so glad to spend some time with you. It's been too long. So thank you for setting this up.

Speaker 2 ([01:17](#)):

Yep. I agree. Like many people, I woke up one morning to my social media exploding to the news that your congregation Middle Collegiate Church in New York was burning. It was actually actively burning when I saw the news come through and I'm sure like thousands of people texted you immediately not knowing what to do, but just wanting to, wanting to connect. Tell us, how are you all, how has, how has the middle, how are you, how has the congregation, like what what's, what has happened around that?

Speaker 3 ([01:56](#)):

It is startling, Cameron, that as we speak, we are literally five months away from that fire. It was December five. And it is it the day that I, the day that I, the day the church burned will be the, will be the day scorched right on our souls. I was babysitting my granddaughter Ophelia. She, they had, they have two babies, my, my kids now, and they, both babies needed some separation. So we picked up Ophelia and brought her to our house. And so we had our phones off. Like we had put her to bed early. We were just like done with the day. Woo. And I get these phone call in the morning from my friends, Claudia and Susan, who were just weeping, like our church, our church is burning down. And I thought, this is what is this? I mean, it's still dreaming. Right?

Speaker 3 ([02:46](#)):

So that, that day was just shocking. I mean, it was the hottest fire. It totally torched our sanctuary leaving only the facade you've been there coming that stone facade and, and it was devastating. And I cannot tell you how much I have found out about the resilience of people. Also like no Pollyanna, no froufrou, truly, even as the fire was burning, there were people kind of sitting Shivah, you know, watching the fire and just, and a whole bunch of folks were like, well, we can't really do anything here. So they went next door to the Women's Prison Association, who our neighbors were experiencing smoke and had been moved. And they took them shopping. I mean, let's take these women shopping. And I don't mean Walmart shopping. Like where do we need to go get coats? Like 80 women. They just take them in shifts in the car to go shopping.

Speaker 3 ([03:46](#)):

So we've seen such incredible love from around the globe. I mean, literally around the globe, a woman who moved to New Zealand who, and does a big check phone calls and letters and texts and Facebook posts from China, from Australia. It's like the world that we did not know how much of the globe had claimed us as their own is what I'm saying. And so we've been besieged with prayers and love and kindness and Cameron, 346, just hold that number 346 people joined the church from March. When we shut down for COVID to March 21, 25 people the day after the fire, what, what does that mean? It, there was something about this whole time that stretched us, pushed us opened us up to do new brave things. And people found us Cameron and claimed us. So how we're doing is we're recovering with resilience.

Speaker 3 ([05:01](#)):

What do you credit for the 346 people? You know, you and I do churchy study, so, right. Yeah. That's right. So something about, I mean, two, two things I know for sure. One is because we had outgrown our sanctuary. We actually had begun to do digital worship and you know, that it was kind of like watch us worship, worship being watch us worship. Yes. When COVID happened, our team just said, you know, what, what can we do better now? And we realized from the digital conference that we did, that there's a kind of face to face, eye to eye intimacy that people actually were craving. So we just did more of that. We used a combination of archived, beautiful stuff in the sanctuary, but also like made new Brady bunch square pieces and more lay people involved. So I think one was, our already artistic, personable worship, like served the worship, right. Is what we do like the best of Broadway and also therapy, if you will. That translated well to the digital space one. And I think too, the way we had already been in the racial justice space, we amped up sadly in the tragic murder of George Floyd. And Ahmaud Arbery and Brianna Taylor. So we did these anti-racist labs and people found that, and they found that in social media and then found their way to the congregation. I think that's what happened.

Speaker 2 ([06:31](#)):

So it's you were already doing so many things, but then this, this context kind of accelerated and amplified a lot of what you already, but you said something that that I think is so essential for people listening in there wasn't, there, there was a an attitude or almost an invitation of not how do we survive this, but now, because we're in this new context, what could we actually do better these contexts then we couldn't have before.

Speaker 3 ([07:05](#)):

That's exactly right. Cameron, where, you know, yes, like a different way to use your resources. Right. We had a team of musicians with a media guy who made a movie occasionally, but now the whole thing had to be a movie. And we realized that middle people were going to be so much, like it was too many of us to say, let's do it on zoom and have this sort of down. So we really had to sort of innovate, what will worship feel like, look like, how can we mimic hugs? How, you know, you've been to our church and how can we mimic warmth? How can we engage this congregation in the same kind of super passionate, experiential feeling way? And it just made us turn upside down what we were doing and make the digital, the primary product. And Cameron people just loved it. They really did love it.

Speaker 2 ([08:05](#)):

I'm one of those people. But what it did was it grants a grants, genuine uh participation and connection, no matter where you are in the world. I mean, it's, it's the greatest opportunity I could have ever imagined for particularly the progressive faith movement. Like this is a wonderful development,

Speaker 3 ([08:28](#)):

And I don't want to rush you to a question. I think you might answer about, like, where do we go from here? But, you know, we don't have a building now and we want one, we know we need to build a building like space matters, place matters. It does. But we also are clear that we are going to have to stay digital. So that's the new horizon is now, what will that look like? What will it look like to create a digital community alongside a physical community? And what w w what will programming look like? So we're excited about playing in that space, but it is, it is only opportunity. Cameron only opportunity to think that I preached in the American Church in Paris right before we shut down for COVID that February, that minister I met there, like joined the church and is under care of our board to come into ordination. Paris, sending him movies and art and preaching, you know, preaching on Good Friday. It's only opportunity to make a global opportunity to make a global family.

Speaker 2 ([09:44](#)):

Yes, yes. So I, I had really mixed feelings watching the sanctuary because I mean, I'm not there obviously, nearly as frequently as your congregation, but when I'm in New York, it's often a place I'm going, or I'm, I'm present in. And, you know, the sanctuary itself was so beautiful. And, and you were the first nonprofit in the U S right? Your EIN number was zero, zero one. So there's real, there's real history in that, in that beautiful building. And so, as I'm watching it burning, I'm also thinking, gosh, you guys are so lucky because now you don't have to deal with old architecture and, you know, rewiring and plumbing that leaks and, you know, so that there, but I'm wondering if this point that, you know, and maybe, you know, it's easy for me in Atlanta to look at you, what you all were going through and say, gosh, you're lucky, but what feels essential? Like what have you learned about church itself? That's essential because at this point you lost, you know, a lot of the accoutrements that a lot of people, particularly in other congregations are still dealing with what feels essential that you carry forward.

Speaker 3 ([11:08](#)):

Yeah. I think one essential thing is people still need to be seen. People need to see each other. So what I, what I worshiped team got really early and did well is not just our clergy faces, but if there's an opportunity for that passing of the peace to show those people in their houses and Brooklyn and those guys, and, you know, Minnesota, this kind of Sabona, that, that Ubuntu, I see you, I exist. We are who we are in relationship. People really need that people of faith really need that, especially in this time of isolation and trauma. So when you see that little kid growing up, because they're participating in worship, or you see that couple out in the park, or you see that women with their cat, you know, saying peace, be with you, Middle family, one of our, so we did a lot of these different pieces, you know, at Middle Peace Be With You was like 20 minutes.

Speaker 3 ([12:12](#)):

You know, we're going to touch everybody, but we put together these different ones. Our seniors are seniors. When one of our seniors says, Uncle Lars misses you. Right. And here's a digital hug. Oh, that acknowledgement of humanity is essential. So it can't just be a movie it's got to have contact. I think the other essential thing is to, to be consistent on message, you know, our messages sort of love God, love neighbor, love self love, period. Everything else is commentary. Almost like a ritual, Cameron, those feel

logical pieces, our sacraments, we're going to get back to love period. Or we're going to get back to say yes to God, you know, whatever these chunks are that people feel you. And I might say, that's our vision statement, or that's our mission statement, but people are like, Oh, I just, that just resonates. I know what that is.

Speaker 3 ([13:11](#)):

That's who we are. So it's an identity marker. I think that's essential. I think that's essential. And maybe the third thing I would say is, especially in this context, now, people don't need preachy preaching. They don't need in/out preaching. They don't need, you know, us against them preaching. I think that folks want to feel like there's a message that works for their Muslim cousin or their, you know, Jewish auntie or their neighbors. That there's some ubiquitous message of fierce love of love that everyone can consume. That makes us feel like a neighborhood across difference.

Speaker 2 ([13:58](#)):

So that leads into well done there, Jacqui bleeds into the book. So let's talk about this book then you're, you're writing a book in the middle of a pandemic, the church burning you know, riots in the city and you're writing about fierce love. So yeah. Tell us, tell us about this book, what it, what it stands for for you,

Speaker 3 ([14:25](#)):

Cameron, you know, so we shut down mid-March I had been working, you know, I've been working on this book for a few years with my agent. What kind of, you know, what can we put in the world about a Grownup God, I was talking about a grownup faith, with a Grownup God? And we just kept playing around with the, with the delivery method. Like what, how would we deliver a book that would preach my sermon, you know, I guess love matters, love period. And no kidding. I believe that I believe the universe conspired

Speaker 3 ([15:01](#)):

Just the way the world was on fire, right? In that April may time period when it was Juneteenth. And we had put together our digital Juneteenth now to call the world to like, get off of black people's necks, that day I had like 17 interviews with publishers. I was like, what the heck is going on? Yeah. And my agent was like, it's just time. So he literally kicked my behind. I mean, it was, you know, it was mid March. We shut down. It was April, it was our conference. We had to pivot to digital. He was yelling at me while I was doing my conference. You must finish this proposal right now. The universe is ready and he was right. We decided not to make it a book so much about race, but it's a book so much about love and it centers on love of self as a first level of love, Cameron and then love of posse and the love of your folks at second level of love.

Speaker 3 ([15:58](#)):

And then love of the world is three concentric circles, nine practices that have to do with being honest, confronting boldly, you know, loving, generously, but just this and from my life, honestly, from my life as a, as a person and then as a clergy person. So it's, memoirish in that the lessons come from my story, but also stories I've picked up along the way from congregants and from folks I know, and it just turned out to be beautiful. Harmony at Penguin Random House bought it. I worked with this amazing woman named Marnie Cochran. We have the same energy level of, Oh my goodness. Let's do it. You know? And she was just the best coach. And honestly it wrote itself. I wrote this book from July to February and

some of it was stories that I had been collecting and workshopped, but the practices honestly came out of this.

Speaker 3 ([17:07](#)):

Year's Oh yeah. That's how we get through that. You know what I mean? Like that remembering the future. Does that make sense? Like, Oh yeah. That's what that is. That's a lesson from mom. Okay. That's what I learned from that young gay man who made community. They just, just connecting the dots because of what we were experiencing that was familiar. And that I felt like I had lessons learned already that I could share. So it's finished. It comes out November nine. You can pre-order now we have a new podcast with CAC. That's called love period. So that's dovetailing. And I just think, honestly, Cameron, that the universe midwife did out of my body.

Speaker 2 ([17:57](#)):

Yes. I, I haven't read it yet, but I can't wait to read it, especially now that you've described it. And, and with such gratitude about the practicality of it, you know, these nine practices and in this sense of midwifing it out of you, I'm, I'm what I'm hearing is this intuition in you that's that probably comes from the universe that says there's something very real at stake, mid actually some things, many things real at stake. If we don't learn to fiercely love, that's right. That's the essential work of humanity, but certainly of people of faith right now,

Speaker 3 ([18:44](#)):

Like period, you know, we could stop right there because it's just true. And again, I I'm deeply inspired by this Ubuntu principles, Zulu people, a person is a person through other persons. To use the word humanity literally is plural. As in, I'm not a human, unless I'm with other humans. And when, and when those other people, Cameron say, I see you Sabona. It really isn't even just, I it's. We see you. We, my mama, my grandmother and my, you know, my great-grandmother my ancestors, see you, my theological world sees you. So whatever that is for you and I it's what we're Christians, but whatever I'm bringing theologically sees you, the future sees you. There's, it's this kind of holistic theology that I think we know is found in every major religion in the world. Some version of loving your neighbor as yourself. Don't withhold that what you need, you know, do unto others, that, that idea of moving in the world as though you are inextricably connected to the other person and the choices you make matter. That's very feminist. That's very womanist and it, we are not going to make it Cameron, if we don't reduce or, or enlarge our faith to a fiercely loving way to be, we're just not going to make it as a human species. I think it's elemental

Speaker 2 ([20:21](#)):

Fierce is exactly the right word and an interesting word. Yes, it is. I bet you had a lot of choices. Why fierce? What is it? What is it about that energy that feels essential?

Speaker 3 ([20:41](#)):

It's, you know, I have to tell a story to get there. You know, the story of being a young kid in Chicago, having just moved from air force bases, speaking with a certain kind of accent that didn't work on the South side of Chicago and getting in trouble in school for being, for talking proper and thinking I'm white with my chocolate self, right? And my mom going with me to school and having two different kinds of reactions, one, she goes to school and she tells the principal, there will be no more children beating up on my child. That's not going to happen. That's fierce. But then she turned the same fierceness onto me.

One time, too many. I went into the house and she's like, you are not also going to run in this house, you know, go out there and handle your business.

Speaker 3 ([21:32](#)):

And in this one moment, this kid had taken my lunch money. And I said, you know, I can't go home without my lunch money. And I didn't want to fight her. So like, I split it with her, you know, you know, to make the girl, we gotta come up with something. But the way my mom loved me fiercely like that, the way, the first time I got called the N word. And this isn't a booklet. My dad went to the base commander and was like, Oh no, we're not having that. And had the, the commander had the father apologized to my dad, the girl had to apologize to me, you know, this idea of reparations and [inaudible]. And my mom on the other hand also was like, let's get on our knees and pray, let's pray for a better world. So I think I was loved fiercely in the, in the bosom of a, of a black family.

Speaker 3 ([22:32](#)):

That was also on the multicultural, multiracial, frontlines, you know, being military folks, I just was loved fiercely. And I, and I love fiercely, right. I, I know that I love hard and persistently, and, and so this kind of God I now image in my older than I used to be age is this fiercely loving mama who loved us enough to come all the way down and snatch us out of the bowels of death, who, who is fiercely protective of our souls and who has created us in her image for us to fiercely love each other so that all the neighborhood kids belong to all of us, the globe's kids belong to all of us. The environment is fiercely loved by us protected by us, through the fire for love, out to the edge of our comfort level for love is, is we, we know it when we, it we've experienced it. And I think, I think the only word for it is fierce.

Speaker 2 ([23:54](#)):

And it changes everything, everything, yes,

Speaker 3 ([23:59](#)):

Everything we, we, we are so we are so capable of it. Katrina comes and people weighed in feted waters to get their neighbors out. A storm comes and you Batten down the hatches in community. You see your neighbor's child in the street, you get them, you jump in front of the car. We all know what this looks like, but the world also can teach us to retreat to be afraid to distance, to stick with your own kind. This book is like, you know, we're all each other's own kind, you know?

Speaker 2 ([24:38](#)):

Yep. We're in this together inter interdependent in ways that we feel the honor often. You know, I'm thinking about all of these congregations all across the world, but who, who may be listening into this. And and what I'm hearing you intuitively offer as wisdom is that the essential theological work is to, to simplify the, the core message that has always been true of the Christian story and many other tribes, religious stories that that is that we have to get back to love to that fierce love that, that that stands up, that speaks up, that, you know that, that creates heaven on earth. And I'm also having known you over a lot of years. I'm, I'm really aware that that love has impacted your internal sense of wisdom and of knowing, and, and so the fierceness is not performative for you.

Speaker 2 ([25:56](#)):

It is amplified and energized by this assuredness, this like this power that resides within you that that for, you know, so many in the selfie culture, that kind of, that kind of internal self-development is not rewarded. It's not even expected anymore. I think at this point. And I'm, and I'm also holding that this this instinct that you've had to remember the ancestors and to, you know, to reconnect to a story that's far beyond our individual lives, that, that we hold all of that in us. And in our seeing, you know, it's more than just in this moment that there's a history behind it. I'm wondering in this COVID experience in this burning down and then rising up what did you learn about your own leadership, your own resilience in that?

Speaker 3 ([27:01](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. I want to say something, I I'm going to back into your question. Cause you said something so important there, Cameron, about seeing, seeing, so this guy, this guy, Rabbi Hartman, do you know the Hartman Institute, their progress white, right. So Rabbi Daniel Hartman, I got to study with him one time in Israel and he did this whole thing on the, you know, the, the Deuteronomy laws of you know, when you, when you see your neighbor's donkey, fall down, pick it up, you know, take it home, feed it, feed it on me. And I,

Speaker 2 ([27:35](#)):

I have that posted on my bathroom mirror.

Speaker 3 ([27:48](#)):

Don't cook it or eat it, just pick it up and take it back, but he said at the end of this teaching the ethical life and ethical life, isn't just about our relationship with God. It's about our relationship with each other. And it is about what we see. It's how we see. So a moral life is losing our indifference and learning how to see. I wanted to make sure I said that into your you're seeing comments that are in/out, John Lewis says that, you know, if you see something, say something, you know, not, this is just not just about airports people or buses, but this idea of really seeing, really seeing. So what I want to say is my sight, my sight has been rewired. I had cataracts when you first met me. I didn't know that, but I did. And they were removed a couple of years ago and I was like, what you can see, you know as a leader, I see differently.

Speaker 3 ([28:45](#)):

Now I see myself differently. I had no idea. I had no idea, Cameron, that I could wake up every morning at five o'clock and sit down and write, and then work a 12 hour day and then go to bed and wake up at 5:00 AM one of the right. They didn't lose my mind. I did gain eight pounds. Almost got those off, but I didn't lose my mind. I didn't kill anybody. I wasn't a cranky, a heifer, sorry. We fixed that. I couldn't believe I can believe I could do it. I could not believe the capacities in my staff. So I see them differently. They have so many gifts cameras. You think your staff has guests, but they have so many gifts. And sometimes leaders can't see the richness of resources in the people around them. And that, if you say, are you ready for this magic word leaders? I need your help. Help comes in these surprising startling ways.

Speaker 3 ([30:01](#)):

I, I couldn't see that leading literally meant being vulnerable, fully vulnerable to the, to the pain and the heartbreak of the time. And that the authentic grieving together is the most powerful experience of well making. But like the public grief who know that if you just let yourself feel it and cry it and say it, people

will go yes. And rise up with you and make it all better. I didn't know that I didn't. We're women leading, you and I, who knew that your femininity or your vulnerability is like power. And I think last, I would say, I didn't know fully how many different kinds of things I know. Do you know that you know how to talk to architects or construction workers? Do you know that you have multiple intelligences? All of which can be pointed toward love? I didn't know that, but I do know.

Speaker 2 ([31:46](#)):

Yes, yes. And that those can be called upon that they're in us, every one of us and can be invited in very powerful ways. Like you have multiple people in you Cameron, right?

Speaker 3 ([32:03](#)):

Yeah. They can all come out. I'm not talking pathology. I mean the aspects of ourselves.

Speaker 2 ([32:11](#)):

Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah. I talk about that in writing too. Like sometimes I invite other energies in, if I'm trying to capture something in my writing that I'm, I'm not able to generate. So I try to borrow of energy when I talk about it, I feel like I'm crazy, but I swear there's something to it. So if you could tweet something and every person of across the world would see it what is the message that you'd tweet that's clear to you that maybe the rest of us need to hear?

Speaker 4 ([32:49](#)):

There is a kind of love, fierce love that crosses boundaries breaks the rules transgresses expectations. And that is the kind of love that will set us all free. Learn how to do it. [Music].