

The Leader's Way Podcast
Episode 28: Circle of Hope with Eliza Griswold

Eliza: This idea that “We are exceptional, we are cooler than, we are more devout than, we are smarter than ... “ That was very much part of the Circle ethos. But what I'm gonna say that's a little bit controversial because I think the root of the problem of exceptionalism in evangelicalism has to do with this notion of absolute salvation.

B: Hi, I'm Brandon Nappi.

H: Hi. I'm Hannah Black.

B: And we're your hosts on The Leader's Way, an audio pilgrimage from Berkeley Divinity School, The Episcopal Seminary at Yale University.

H: On this journey, we reflect on what matters most in life as we talk about all things spirituality, innovation, leadership and transformation.

B: Hey, Hannah.

H: Hi, Brandon. How are you doing?

B: You know, it's hot, hazy, and humid here in in the New England summer, ewwww. And in Connecticut. And, I'm moving kinda slowly. I'm a little grumpier than usual. I hope it doesn't affect the humans I'm living with and my dear colleagues like yourself. Most of my grumpiness is usually just on the inside, but I I welcome you to tell me if it's wearing off.

H: I think you're just generally so golden retriever that when you describe yourself as grumpy, I read you as, like, maybe a sleepy happy retriever.

B: That's it. Or, like, I'm a Goldendoodle. A Goldendoodle, just overheating.

H: No. I'm here for the grump, to be honest. I like the honesty of the grump.

B: Okay. Here's ... I mean, maybe we'll get theological for a second. Some days, and I wonder you wonderful listeners out there, whether you're a veteran listener, whether you're new to the podcast, you're a clergy leader, you're a seminarian and you've just stumbled randomly off the street into the podcast. Sometimes when I get up in the morning, I'm just overwhelmed by the human condition. Meaning, just the heaviness around how human beings hurt one another. I mean often without intending to, and just the kind of brokenness of the world and the suffering. And I think one of the things that maybe unites us as kind of leaders in in the church or, you know, teaching theology, like work-- it's sometimes like our nervous system is on the outside of our bodies, and we're just ... we resonate with the suffering of the world and the experience of others. And some days, maybe it's like a summertime thing. Some days it's just so much.

H: Preach.

B: Yeah. So that's how I'm doing today. How are you doing? Tell me.

H: Okay. So my plans for this conversation were different from that. Like I said, I love it. I also have a feeling that this kind of honest, hard look at the human condition is where we're headed for the rest of this episode. So I'm gonna ... I'm gonna bring us up for air just quickly.

And I was reminded, Brandon, of one of my favorite jokes that you and I had from the Leader's Way week in residence, because I was rewatching the best Disney docuseries of all time. And I don't think you've seen this. This is a real live recommendation from Hannah Black.

B: My mood is already lifted. Tell me.

H: You have to go on Disney plus and you have to search "The Imagineering Story." Okay? Now it's, like, several episodes long. It's very interesting because it talks about, like, the way that technological innovations were, like, harnessed by the Disney Imagineers to create these new and wonderful things. Okay. So I'm watching the episode all about Epcot, and they start talking about, you know, that big Epcot ball, which we re-remembered together through Google, is a ride called Spaceship Earth. And our trip to the Beinecke forever lives in my memory now as spaceship Beinecke because it was a journey through time, space, and communication. Okay.

First of all, I learned watching this docuseries that Ray Bradbury was hired to write that ride. Oh. I don't think it was originally narrated by Dame Judi Dench, but now it's narrated by Judi Dench. So you get in your little car in the big Epcot ball, which looks a lot like the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, except that it's a circle instead of a square.

B: It does. You can't unsee it. Okay.

H: And then this is what Dame Judy whispers in your ear. Are you ready? Hopefully, this isn't copyright infringement. "Like a grand and miraculous spaceship, our planet has sailed through the universe of time. And for a brief moment, we have been among its passengers." Already amazing. Right? "But where are we going, and what kind of future will we discover there? Surprisingly" and this is where we get spaceship by Nikki, "the answers lie in our past. Since the dawn of recorded history, we've been inventing the future one step at a time. So let's travel back in time together. I'll show you how our ancestors created the world we know today, and then it will be your turn, (Leaders Way Fellows) to create the world of tomorrow."

B: Woah. So we need a ride here at Yale, except we have one, and it's called Spaceship by Nikki.

H: It's true. Maybe if you rode the elevator enough times, it would feel ... Similar.

B: So for the folks not tracking this, right? The Beinecke, ... Rare Book and Manuscript Library is a treasure trove of humanities manuscripts and books. And we took our Leaders Way Fellows into the annals, into the depths of this beautiful alabaster building. It does ... does look a lot like spaceship Earth.

H: It does. It's really thin marble. So when you go inside, you can see the sunlight coming through the marble, but it's all squares. Whereas spaceship Earth is like a circle of triangles. A geodesic dome, if you will.

B: A g -I will. And because ... when else do you get to say "geodesic dome"-- designed by Buckminster Fuller, if I'm not mistaken.

H: So I don't know. As you've been, like, having your summertime grump, I've been in air conditioning watching this Disney docuseries.

B: Oh my gosh. Hannah bringing the happiness. Well, of course, I was thrilled because, you know, I had twenty of Thomas Merton's letters in front of me. And just the joy of watching our fellows dig through history and ... and access Merton's letters. They were like little kids, and I was like a little kid watching them be like little kids. Did you have a favorite document, Hannah?

H: One of my favorites for sure, was what I was referring to as Jonathan Edwards' theological scrapbook, which is not the technical term for this document, to be clear, but it's like a big ... imagine, like, a big tome that began with empty pages, and then you can tell that what Jonathan Edwards did was, he ripped out one page at a time of his teeny Bible, stuffed it in there, and then, like, almost wrote his own commentary on each page of the bible, and then he'd flip it, rip out a page of the bible, stick it in, and write his commentary. So it's just like crazy large leafy tome with this like minuscule scrupulous penmanship that was super interesting.

B: Yeah. So whatever y'all are imagining, listeners out there, when you think minuscule, shrink it by another thousand times, and that's what Jonathan Edwards was writing and reading from. It's incomprehensible ... how that person could have read. I hope they have Jonathan Edwards' eyeballs over at the medical school.

Because they must

H: You never know. Really.

B: Those were some skilled eyeballs. I just ...

H: And his sermon notes were tiny like that too. Teeny tiny.

B: So we we create the future by looking at the past. I mean, I think, ... I think our fellows really got that, appreciated that, and we're doing this in in in real time. Totally. In a really intentional way. I mean, I'm just so excited that our 40 or so fellows came together and were just so diligent and intentional and caring for one another as they seek to listen to, you know, how to follow the Holy Spirit to meet some of the greatest challenges of the world. So pray for them. They'll be with us through March of '25.

H: And then join us next year And then join us. On Spaceship Beinecke. You know, it would be a really excellent prank is instead of giving my mini lecture to introduce the library, if I just read the Judi Dench script to see if anyone noticed.

B: Oh my gosh. I wonder if I could sneak a fog machine into Beinecke. I feel like it needs a mist. Yeah.

H: Mystery. Oh, definitely. And at least one animatronic.

B: Okay. Grant proposal.

H: Grant proposal. Okay. Well, at the risk of truly, devolving, maybe we should introduce today's guest and, instead of looking at the literary past, enjoy the literary present.

B: Good idea. Hannah, I'm so excited that we have Eliza Griswold with us this week on the podcast. As many of you know, Eliza Griswold is author of six books of poetry and nonfiction. Her book *Amity and Prosperity, One Family and the Fracturing of America* was awarded the 2019 Pulitzer Prize in general nonfiction. She writes for the New Yorker. She's taught at New York University. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey where she teaches and leads the journalism department. And in this episode, we are looking at her new book, *Circle of Hope, A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in the American Church*, a real deep dive into a progressive evangelical Christian church that most of us would never get to explore without her amazing work. So, I hope you enjoy Eliza Grizwold.

B: Eliza Grzwab, we're so thankful that you've joined us on the podcast.

Eliza: I am excited to be here. Thank you guys for having me.

B: This book about Circle of Hope Church is so tender and so vulnerable. I mean, there's certainly joy and beauty, and in some ways, it's like watching a train wreck in slow motion, one that you can't do anything to fix or to help or support in any way. So, I mean, thank you for this work. And I'm wondering what drew you to Circle? How did you find them, and and what made you think, oh, there's an important story here to tell?

E: Yeah. Well, that is all certainly the case. You know, as a reporter about who works on religious issues and works on religion for the New Yorker, I am very aware of the way that the media portrays sort of the monolith of evangelicals. Right? And it's certainly true demographically that we've got a overwhelmingly conservative majority in those who consider themselves evangelical.

Yet at the edge of that population, we're looking at at least 3 1/2 percent of adult Americans, about 8,000,000 people, who are a very different kind of evangelical. And I have a lot of hope for some of the people in that movement who I think are pretty incredible. And so I found Circle of Hope because I was writing for the New Yorker about Shane Claiborne who is kind of like one of the foundational leaders of this movement, I would say, for many decades. And I was with him on a street corner in Philadelphia where he was doing his latest project of biblical interpretation, which was literally melting guns into garden implements to follow the

biblical injunction, you know, of beating swords into plowshares. And as he was on the street corner in a pretty hard-hit neighborhood of Philadelphia struck by the opioid crisis, you know, with his mobile forge poking the barrel of an AK 47 into this fire, I noticed behind him a group of people who only could be members of the evangelical left.

They were in thrift store chic. They had sleeves of tattoos, but many of them earnest tattoos, right? Some piercing, but most of the women were in long skirts. You know, lot of crocs. And I suspected that they were members of a church, and I asked Shane, and he said, “Yep. Those are members of the church that I'm going to. And that church is called Circle of Hope.” So it was through that introduction that I came to know first the pastors and then those who went to the four congregations in Philly and New Jersey.

B: I think there are so many folks who are still having a hard time wrapping their heads around progressive evangelical. Right? For all the reasons you suggested. These are not categories that folks often put together. And so, you know, just for our listeners who may think they know what an evangelical is, and may think they know what a progressive is, you know, can you share what does it mean in the Venn diagram for these two categories to overlap in a totally authentic, sincere way, right?

E: Yeah. Now that's a great question. So I think probably the best way to answer it with is like a little history lesson, which is ... so we see evangelicals today as obviously overwhelmingly conservative and really members of the Christian right. But if we go back a few decades, I mean, most of the ... more than a few decades, for hundreds of years in America, evangelicals were people radically committed to social justice, who were rejecting the status quo in favor of building a kingdom of heaven on earth for everyone. And it's only since the late sixties and seventies where what sort of Republican political operatives and conservative pastors, meaning Jerry Falwell in particular, came together to form a voting block, first in opposition to segregation, and then very quickly in opposition to abortion.

Over those past decades, we've seen “evangelical” become associated with the Republican party and with conservative politics and social movements. That is a new phenomenon. So at the edge of that movement for decades, we have seen beginning again in the late sixties, a mass movement among hippies, among the counterculture, right, to embrace Jesus. And they did this for lots of reasons. I mean, you had, you know, kids strung out on drugs and hate ashberry originally listening to street preachers being like, wait. There has to be a better way.

But this was a popular movement of the Jesus freaks. Right? We had Jesus on the cover of Time Magazine, the musicals Hair, Jesus Christ Superstar. Like this was a popular movement and it was socially conservative. I mean, at the heart of it, these guys were living on communes, but they were not embracing free love. They were following the kind of conservative biblical tenants, social tenants of the bible. So that was the late sixties. We watched through the seventies, eighties, nineties, and 2000. As this group becomes aware, they really are formed in reaction to conservative evangelicals. They are doing something very different. And I think what I love most about them is they are no less literally adhering to the Bible. And so all those terms that we have, that we assert, like, are kind of like dog whistle for evangelical, like, “Well, I'm Bible believing.” Well, I would have a hard time saying to these guys who are, like, building gardens in vacant lots in Pennsylvania and in Philadelphia, like that they're not Bible believing.

They are following the literal tenets of the Sermon on the Mount. And so if for that reason I think they're really exciting and very interesting.

I use the term and others use the term “evangelical left” and even “progressive evangelical,” which doesn't really get to who the heart of who they are because the idea is rejecting political worldly political categorizations. And so for that reason, probably the better term is radical evangelical.

H: So keeping in mind all of this historical context and then all kinds of context, really, Did things still surprise you when you started to speak with this community? What surprised you?

E: What happened in the book was not what any of us foresaw. And, you know, I really did not intend to cover a train wreck, and the pastors of Circle of Hope certainly did not intend to have a train wreck either. And when we set out together and I first approached them and sat down with them at one of their Monday morning pastors’ meetings, I said that I really wanted to follow in immersion journalism. So follow them very close-up for the next few years. The four of them, and as many of, really, members of the church who wanted to be involved. We envisioned a positive story. Right? We envisioned a hopeful story of what it meant for this alternative group to be following Jesus in radical ways. And then, of course, the pandemic struck. And then of course, George Floyd. And so many of my friends who don't care about church at all have read this, and just felt like they have been a part of this train wreck in so many communities and organizations.

Right? So in that, these guys are certainly not alone in losing their beloved community, but that didn't make it any less painful. And for me, you know, the huge amount of integrity of each of the pastors to allow me to follow them despite behavior they hated, their fights, their flaws exposed was really humbling. And really, I do feel very, very tenderly toward them and hope that I've honored them in that process.

B: I wonder if you can take us into their model for church growth. I mean, the founders of Circle described what I think they called a friend's model of church planting, and the cell was very important, these small groups of folks. And so I have a sense that that Circle was on the one hand, a very large community and movement, but then also had smaller subdivisions, which also played a really important role. And this is just fascinating, you know, to me and I'm sure to Hannah too. You know, we sort of live around the church within the church, and we're fascinated by how churches grow and evolve and change. So what was this friend's model of church planting at Circle?

E: Yeah. I mean, this is where Circle is very much in the mainstream evangelical movement. The bottom line has been about growth, growing your church. That can be very problematic because although, you know, that's following exactly Jesus' injunction, right, to fulfill the great commission and, you know, spread the word around the world to all people, the truth is also that it dovetails with capitalism. And so you have this idea of selling church. And the church growth movement itself is incredibly problematic because it comes out of ... actually missionary work in India, in the global south, but in India in particular where Western missionaries found they were most successful working within a caste model because they found that people like to go to church with people like them.

So this idea of church growth, like ... you target a community, you get people, like-minded people, socioeconomically, racially, to go to church together was problematic from the start. It was used to reinforce, you know, the racism inherent in American churches. And then in the eighties and nineties, it became part of this cell model. Like, it could be a Bible study, but these guys are not Bible study types. They're gonna meet in a skate park. They're gonna meet in a bar. Right? They're gonna meet beyond the bounds of a normal small group in an evangelical church. But that's the idea. How do you be part of a large community and have, and live that along with other people? And the cells for many people were more powerful than certainly than the worship experience on Sundays. Like, you know, Rick Warren uses a cell model lots and lots of ...

H: That's the church I grew up in. Yeah. You know? You know?

E: And he's a wonderful and pretty complicated guy. You know? I mean, evolving, I would say. I just have been talking him a great deal on the issue of women, you know, as pastors, and he's really shifted on that. And I sort of wonder, oh my goodness. I don't think he would be pleased to be associated with progressive evangelicalism. He would reject that for sure. And yet I think some of this wrestle for the moral heart of politicalism is very much where he is. And so I think in that way, he would respond to this community.

B: Yeah. I mean, you mentioned, you the role of women, particularly with Rick Warren, but I wonder if you could describe the role of women, what leadership was like for women in Circle, and I wonder if in that overlapping part between progressive and evangelical topics of women, women's leadership, race are still really hotly contested.

E: They absolutely are. The issue of race is what's most prevalent in the book and many ways in what divides the church in the end. One of the things happening alongside that was that the issue of women and leadership didn't come into the fullness of discussion because ... Right? It was like, well, these questions are asked and answered. We have women who are pastors, and yet ... the division of labor within the church was such that 12 women made the Easter cookies. Women did double labor. And I know I can think of some people listening to this and being like, well, that is not true. You did not. No. I understood. I understood. And one thing that was incredibly prevalent was that the two women pastors were often silenced by the men, were often not fully present in conversations, and that was incredibly palpable.

As in so many communities, like, as I sat watching this, I thought, "Well, how come you guys can't get around the changes that need to happen around race and women at the same time. These are intersectional. We know intersectionality." They did too. And yet constantly, there was a wrestling between "What's more important here and what are we gonna do first and how?"

H: So, I mean, speaking of issues that many churches deal with, Brandon brought up the pandemic and George Floyd's murder, and we all experienced that somewhere with somebody. But you've had the opportunity to really reflect on how a community encountered these events. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

E: I first sat down with the pastors and asked for permission to embed myself in their lives and in the church in the sort of early fall of 2019, so long before, obviously, the pandemic and George Floyd or --about 6 months before. And what happened is, first, with the pandemic, the issue of closing the church to in-person worship was the first sign of conflict I saw among the pastors personally, but also ideologically. Right? Because you had one camp saying, "Look. We need to follow ... the best way to love your neighbor is to shut down in-person worship." And you had alongside that, those sort of harder core history of, you know, "We do not follow government structures. We follow Jesus. So who cares what the governor mandates?" and not in a completely irresponsible way, but more like, "Well, the governor says we can go to Home Depot. And ... And if you can go to home Home Depot, you should be able to go to church."

H: And in fact, isn't that so important? Yeah.

E: Exactly. Like, who is deciding our values here? Because if you're allowing, you know, the secular government, whether it's progressive or conservative, to decide our values, then we are not being the church. So that contest between, and particularly, the two male pastors, as I watched that unfold pretty quickly, was an indication to me that there was more conflict ahead. So they decided to go online. You know, they did that. And as soon as they were online, the two male pastors, as they said in their own word, they ran away with it. Right? They did a lot of, like, pork pie hat mansplaining. Like, it very much dovetailed with, like, ... what we think of, like, evangelical megachurch. Like, "Hey, I'm over to you. Let's, like, riff on scripture." And the women got left behind and people noticed that. And then what happened within, obviously, within several months after that was that the murder of George Floyd brought up a new fight, a new wrestle between "What does it mean to be the church?" And Circle of Hope was really good at protesting. They've been doing that for a long time. And yet there were those within the church, a, who said protesting wasn't enough, and then another group who said we don't get involved in politics.

H: That's what I was just wondering about.

E: Right? So that same contest came up again. Like, of course, like, we abhor the police union. We abhor the murder of George Floyd. We are antiracist in our DNA. But we aren't making a political stand. We don't do mandates. We don't do worldly politics. And so then again, you had that wrestle over "What are we called to be? Who are we called to be as Christians, and how do we live that out?"

B: Yeah. I I'm thinking in so many ways, the story of circle is this is a kind of story of exceptionalism. And, you know, this is one of the great stories of America. Right? Where "We're not like the others. We're special and different in some way." And the moment when that is built into the DNA is the moment the collapse begins, it seems to me. But what sort of lessons about exceptionalism did you learn, and how, if at all, is this tied into bigger questions of American exceptionalism?

E: Okay. So that is 1000%, in my experience of reporting on them, accurate. Right? This idea that we are exceptional. We are cooler than. We are more devout than. We are smarter than.

That was very much part of the Circle ethos. But what I'm gonna say that's a little bit controversial because I think the root of the problem of exceptionalism in evangelicalism has to do with this notion of absolute salvation. And, you know, I've looked at this for a really long time.

My first book, *The 10th Parallel*, you know, I traveled throughout the global south looking at how is it that in the places where Christianity is growing the fastest, it's also often associated with violence. Right? And because there is this assumption, this us-versus-them, we are better than, we have the right to defend ourselves, a nativism that overlaps with exceptionalism. We see that at America these days with the Christian nationalism. We see the rise of that. It allows an entire dog-whistle culture. Because what is Christian nationalism and how has, you know, Trump played into that? He has created this idea of America is an exceptional, Christians are exceptional in a European model-- meaning they're white. Right? So the theology in which I was raised there was no idea of exclusive salvation. None at all. And it wasn't until I became a reporter, in the early 2000s, you know, and first went to Sudan with Franklin Graham. For the first time, he went to the north to visit, Bashir, you know, who had who had waged the largest jihad in history. Right? These two men were sworn enemies. Watching that clash of civilization stuff in real time, I just had not understood that there were Christians out there who believed that their faith made them better than everybody else. And not even in some prejudicial way, made them compelled to help bring others to their faith. The whole idea of love becomes really complicated. And then ...condescending because it's like

H: There's like an inherent conflict that you're bringing to the dynamic. Yeah.

E: That dialectic that some are saved and some are damned cannot ... even with people at the church and --not the current pastors, but some of the older-school people. I went to the mat around this because this is really something I think about. And one of the ... one of the founders just kept saying, you know, "Well, I believe that even good Hindus meet Jesus in heaven." And, like, maybe that workaround worked in 1990, but it does not work anymore. And I think for me, it's really getting gritty about that. Really getting gritty about that is really important.

H: I wanna know what it was like to enter a community with such a sensitive and tender charge and to form relationships and report on people who are real flesh and blood people, not just characters. Tell us about that experience.

E: Sure. So I'll start with that idea of reporting on flesh and blood people. So I have, you know, decades of experience doing that, and which is why I feel that I can do it. And especially the ... my last book, you know, I spent seven years in a community, at the edge of Appalachia with a family who was sickened by oil and gas production next to them in the land. And the Haney's is their name. And they did not understand what was ... like, they weren't sure what medically was wrong with them. Their whole community loved the oil and gas industry because it was bringing money back to their farms. They themselves had gotten involved and signed a lease to get to save their barn. And so I'm used to entering contested communities. I'm used to following people who don't have all the answers to the conditions from which they're suffering and muddling through. I often describe immersion journalism as, like, somebody's driving the car of their life. Right? And they stop at a stop sign, and I go up to the window and knock on, and I'm like, "Hey. Can I get in the car of your life?" And they're like, "Sure. Sure. I'm going to,

like, goin' to Boston. I'll be there in 3 hours. Ready?" I'm like, "Yeah." And I'll get in. And, like, four years later, it's more accurate to say that ... We're like in Mexico and they've had 3 flat tires and are like, "What happened to my life? Are you ... did you do that?" Like, like it's weird. It's a weird and wonderful relationship and it's ... it can be pretty fraught.

So with these guys, you know, tenderly following them was really difficult. It wasn't so difficult as things unfolded. Right? Because they would forget that I was there. Part of my process involves sharing what I've written, never on the page. We don't do that as journalists. But allowed reading back to folks what I had observed and what they had said. And that's a part of a fact-checking process. Now that isn't like "Does this sound exactly right to you? You've got to agree with it." But it's very helpful, because people often catch things where they say, "Well, it wasn't quite like that. and this is what I was thinking." So that process was excruciating because it made them encounter who an observer had seen them to be, and it made them relive one of the most painful experiences of their lives. So that was really, really hard. And, again, the amount of time itself that each of them devoted to this project was pretty incredible.

B: I'm curious --because your work is so immersive and you have beyond a front-row seat to humanity, how do you change in the process of this deep immersion, this close looking curiosity? You're getting the whole spectrum of people's lives. And I wonder how you evolve and change in such an intensive process like that.

E: That is something nobody has ever asked, So I'll answer it as I think about it, which is ... You know, I say in the book that watching the pastors kind of fight with one another, wrestle with one another was an experience of harrowing. Right? And that word obviously has two meanings--both harrowing because it's difficult; but in terms of farming, like, you know, raking the earth to break up the clods in it. Right? And ... and that's painful, but it helps one see oneself. And there's, like, a little parable I love about a princess who has to marry a dragon and her ... you know, the wise woman, her grandmother says the night before her wedding, like, "You gotta wear a hundred dresses. And then, every night you're supposed to sleep with this guy, take off a dress, and tell him he has to take off a layer of scales. Right? And that happens. And what happens as the dragon pulls off more and more scales is, you know, he begins to bleed. And, of course, when the scales are removed, he's a human underneath. And I think that for me, walking this walk alongside people is very much like that, where I am invited time and again to see my own blindness, how I'm like them, you know--the presumptions that I share.

The ethics of it are complicated. So when I catch myself, like, am I being honest here? What's my role? Have I overstepped? Because one thing I really think we need to have a more full ... the idea of fly on a wall journalism is just not true. You know? Things change by virtue of our presence, and there are places in this book where it's intellectually dishonest to say that by virtue of being there, I didn't change things. And also, like, they were ... they were, so they could not hear one another. And there were moments where I would sit in these meetings and just be like, "Hey man, are you here? Like, I have what I need now. You guys are not here, you're pretty close here.: And they would just pull the same crap. Oh my gosh. So how does it change me? I hope it helps me see my human flaws and address them. It definitely makes me ask ethical questions about being alive all the time. And, I mean, obviously, when it comes to a church, you know, I'm a pastor's kid. Like, does it make me investigate my theology? One thousand percent. One thousand percent.

And all my little dodgy answers of, like, “Yes, I'm sociologically a Christian,” like, they're not good at ... they're not even more front and center with people living it like this. So it definitely it helps me ask those questions both, like, to the deepest core of myself, but also on the surface. Like, how do how do I live this alongside them? If that makes sense. It's hard. I mean, it's killer. Like ... yeah. The project, you know, one of my recent stories to the New Yorker was about kids who've lost their limbs in Gaza. And, you know, I just was with some of those kids and then I got on a plane and there were some pushy teenagers on the plane. And I lost my stuff on those teenagers on a scale of which was completely unacceptable. And I know well enough from a long time of working in war zones that *that* is secondary trauma. And if I don't take care of myself, it's gonna come out sideways. And although for ... there were certainly not stakes like that for this book and the people in this book, there were for their lives. That's something I'm really protective about. In the secular media, like, the fall of a church is, like, “Yeah, of course, they all fail.” Right. It's like whoever belongs to those already ... Who knows? Right? And I'm like, no. You have to understand these guys really, really, really care about what exactly is on this page, and I have to be vigilant about that in a way that sometimes I'm not. So I don't know if that helps answer.

H: I think as an author, it seems like one of the hallmarks of kind of Eliza Griswold's work is this honesty. And Brandon and I were chatting earlier about how, Brandon, you wake up and feel the weight of humanity sometimes. And I think actually Brandon and I see that at work all the time working with leaders who have high hopes and creative ideas, and then just, like, things get twisty or wonky or clumsy and bad things happen, and that's not what we wanted. So, like, part one of my question is, how do you stay afloat when you're taking such an honest look at the world? And kind of relatedly because of the nature of this project, I'm wondering if you'd be willing to share a little bit about your relationship with the church.

E: Sure. So how do I stay afloat? Like, this gets ... I'll answer it honestly because that's what I've gotta do, but ... this is my calling. Right? Like, this is a vocation, and I aspire to being, like, a kind of translator. Like transmitting, like, what does it mean to have seen this, and putting it on a page. Right? And a channel. Right? Not a channel like ... I have a pretty big spotlight. You know? I've been doing this for a long time. I have all the stars and blah blah blah. So what if I can ... Like, what is my responsibility, and who needs that spotlight? Right? That I think about that before I tell a story every single time. We have some talking in journalism about, like ... “Stay close to power, write about the president and the” ... blah. I have zero interest in that. I cannot do it. It has not served me very well, but I don't do it. Right? I don't care. Like, if you put me in a press junket to follow a candidate, I'm gonna be, like, in the smoothie store interviewing those every major speech. Like, yeah, it's just how I am. I don't like the phrase, like, “Of the margins” because I think it's got a lot of light sanctimoniousness in it, but that is ... I'm interested in the edges of places. So that's, okay. So that's the staying afloat, is that it's a vocation, and we do our vocations whether they keep us afloat or not. Right? And then what was the second part of that? There was another part. Oh, well, like, what your relationship with the church is like? Okay.

So my relationship with the church, like, what it was like, what happened, and what it's like now. Okay. So what it was like in the beginning is those dudes were skeptical. Right? Not so much the pastors, but there was a lot of, like, spring the real, know it all theology students.

B: Like, basically I've never met one. I don't know what you're talking about. Characteristic of anyone.

E: So there were a lot of people who are like, oh, we're, like, post everything, and who the hell are you? And, like, you know, one said to me, and it was pretty apt, I'm afraid there was a story that ran in The New York Times Magazine, like, maybe 2 years ago called "Bad Art Friend." Do you guys remember that? It was like it was one of these kind of cultural clash. And that person was like, "I'm afraid you're writing 'Bad Art Friend.'" And I hadn't thought of it, but I was like, "It's kind of a good model." So there ... I do not deal well with sanctimoniousness at all. Be it progressive, be it conservative. I sniff that stuff out and it's maybe it's like ... intergenerational trauma of a pastor kid, whatever. Like, I don't believe it. Right? That's more of that sort of problem with exceptionalism. But, you know, my relationships with the pastors and those who chose to be involved over time were pretty humbling. And, you know, I think in particular, like, if I talk about Ben a little bit, you know, when it became clear that --Ben, the founder's son, who was one of the current pastors. So the structure of the book, I never say this, but instead of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, it's Johnny, Rachel, Julie, and Ben. Okay? Right? It's the same story told from 4 perspectives, and they are the current pastors. And then Ben's parents, the white family, is still associated with the church-- very much so. And that's kind of the heart of the conflict is, "What is the nature of their association?" When it became clear that Ben, the founder's son, was not gonna be able to stay at the church, which is ultimately what happens, whether he was gonna be kicked out or whether he was gonna quit, which he could not have believed. Like, this ... his whole life was about taking over this church. And when I said, "Are you gonna let me still follow you?" If I were Ben, I would have been like, f-you and your dang book from which I benefit not at all. Like, why am I doing this? Like, I did this because I believe that it was helping people understand Jesus. It's a train wreck. I don't know what this book is about anymore, and I am out.

Like, I'm not saying that, but that's not what Ben said. He said, "Okay. I guess so." And it was that integrity in that relationship. Mhmm. With Julie, who's one of the two women pastors, when we first sat down, she was the most skeptical before the book began. And when I sat down with her for the first time and I was like, tell me about your childhood. And she was like, "I was 11 when I first went to missionary boot camp," and I was like, "Oh my god." And she was like, "This is why I did not wanna talk to you." She understood, like, her family had faced a really difficult that her ... they'd gone to federal prison over basically what we call now tax protesting kind of proto-Q-anon. They'd been duped by a snake oil salesman telling them that basically God didn't want them to pay taxes. And just ... they had been they had been subjects of a scam and they believed still that that was divinely ordained and they'd had to go to prison. And so as these stories emerge and Julie shared them with such honesty, and I went to meet her family, which had made her really nervous, our relationship really deepened because she was --I don't wanna put words into her mouth, but I think she began from a position of, like, "Reporters are scary people who distort" because that's what she'd been raised with. Yep. Right?

And she after I saw her parents, she was like, "They love you." And not in some phony, like, I gave them a snow job. Right? Like, I was incredibly careful with telling her dad's story. You know? So she, I think, for me, really, like, deepening that relationship was pretty amazing. You know, Rachel, ... I wanna be careful about talking publicly about Rachel because being public has been complicated for Rachel. And the exposure of this book is something she's quite reluctant about. And this is the very beginning, so it's unclear what that will bring. I have said to

her that I know that she is beloved on the page, that she ... the things she fears appear to be not accurate. Like those ... but there's nothing and that can be patronizing. So we'll just let that one go. And Johnny, oh my goodness, Johnny Rasheed. Johnny Rasheed is like a one man band of entertaining everything. So Johnny was the most excited about a book that, you know, he was gonna be in this book. He wrote his own book in the course of it. Like, he was all over it. It's also complicated because in many ways, he was one of the leaders of the demise of the church, and he left for another church where he's currently a pastor. And I think he has concerns about how people might perceive him as a result of this book. So that kind of gives but we're ... I'm in touch with all of them to to varying degrees, and I will continue to be there that way.

And my job is to be there for their happiness, their anger, their surprise; to abandon that in some way. And the Whites themselves, it's hardest for them, the founders of the church, because they lost their church. They aren't in the book as much as they hoped. They --even the structure itself that follows the four current pastors-- it hadn't occurred to me that they would think they should have their own chapters too, which kind of speaks to what the issues may be. But I have the utmost respect for them, and I hope that their experience of this book publication will bring them friends and people who understand them in ways they can't anticipate yet because they feel very maligned by ... maybe not so much the book, but very much by the church.

B: So you end the book, *Circle of Hope*, by telling the story of your dad's illness and death, which was marked by immense pain and and even terror. Your dad, as some folks will know, is Frank Griswold, who was the presiding bishop in the Episcopal Church from '98 to 2006. And you say as you write about your dad so beautifully, it's just so moving, "To love is to grieve." And I'm wondering why you decided to end the story about this particular church with a story about your dad.

E: So on one level, it's simply we have a mandate or, like, a lesson at the New Yorker, which is follow the clock chronology. Chronology is always your friend. And it happened that my dad got sick and died, like, during Lent. My plan had been to end this book on Easter in 2023, which was basically the last time the pastors were going to work as a church. Like, as soon as that had become clear that that was the end of Circle of Hope, I was like, okay. That's the end of the book.

And it just happened that, you know, my dad got sick at the same time. And anyone within the sort of Episcopal church will know that the Episcopal church has been in a long, slow ... oh, I'm sorry to say this, but, like, dying for a long time. Like, if you're looking at numbers. Right? So the phenomenon of Circle of Hope is a larger Protestant reality. I mean, 40,000,000 Americans have left church over the past several decades. 40,000,000 Americans no longer go to church, the majority of them being mainline protestants. So my dad sort of marked the end of an era in the Episcopal church of ... like, he's probably the last white man who's gonna have gone to Harvard and Oxford to lead the Episcopal church. Right? Like, that era of whatever that is, elite liberal nonsense, is over, and he epitomized that. And a lot of my work as a human and as a journalist is looking at that political reality in America. What does it mean for that sort of patrician liberalism to die? Who grows up in its stead? What were its values? And so for that reason, it seemed exactly the right way to end it.

It also seemed one of the pastors had felt like, “How can you have done this with us and yet you are so withheld on the page?” And that is the method that I use. And I have had a lot of old school, you know, pride about the fact that I don't use the vertical pronoun unless I need to. There's no I. This is not “I, I, I.” It's not about me. And yet I understood what she meant, that I needed to come forward. And I thought that this reality of losing my dad at that time was exactly—it needed to be there. And I missed a lot at the end of the church. Right? Like, I missed a lot of reporting because I was dealing with my dad.

H: Wow. It's such an interesting way of circling back to the idea of exceptionalism though, because ... I personally don't know a ton. I don't have lived experience with Circle of Hope. But, certainly growing up at Saddleback there was a sense of exceptionalism. And now being a part of the Episcopal church, there's just a different flavor brand of exceptionalism. But I love that you're drawing our attention to the fact that this is more than just a specific denomination or church culture's problem, if you will. We're all actually in a certain boat together. We may in fact do well to recognize it.

E: I mean, churches are places for wounded people. Like, they don't come to church, you know, on the wings of victory. They come to ... you know? Like, speak to humanity. And, of course, that's who's in a church. So that is what is to be expected. And having had a front row as a pastor's kid to all the craziness, that is expected. I mean, a couple of my friends who are, you know, ordained, who've read this book are like, “This needs to be taught in seminary.” Because this is about pastoral care and the crisis that our pastors are in. Right? Like, people, pastor --let me talk about people leaving the church. Pastors are leaving the church in droves. And are they supported? Because they don't make enough money to make this their only job. They're under so much fire. They're asked to take care of so much. And I hope that if this book does anything, it tells that story effectively.

H: This also reminds me so much of ... there was a Yale Center For Public Policy and Public Theology Conference where one of the panels was about Christianity in the media, and it was people like Joy Ann Reid and Sarah McCammon talking about what it's like to be a person with church experience in the media, and how often they end up being the only person in the room with, like, lived experience of the church or people who have met the evangelicals who are sort of like, boogeymen in media stories. But it's ... it's really interesting that you're drawing attention to evangelicals who are even calling themselves evangelicals, but aren't the classic character that we get in the news.

E: These guys might, They were really uncomfortable being called evangelicals. Some of them.

H: Really? Okay.

E: I was like, I'm so sorry. Good luck getting away from that. I know your theology well enough to feel that I have the authority to explain. Like, you know, do you believe, that ... you know, in the absolute salvation? You know what I mean? Like, I could ... They're yang enough to wrestle that question to the ground, but it is a fraught one.

H: Wow. Well, it's a ... it's a weird political moment for an American to go around saying, "I'm a Christian! I'm a Christian" because of what that means in the news.

E: Absolutely.

B: I just feel so much gratitude, Eliza. Thank you for this work. Thank you for sort of committing to be there in the trenches amid the woundedness that is humanity in the church. And, thank you for saying yes to this vocation, you know. I mean, you said to love is to grieve. To tell the truth is also to love. And so, you know, thank you for kind of this unique way of loving in the world, to tell the truth about the human experience, and sharing it with so many of us. So we're just so thankful for your work and your time.

E: Well, I can't thank you guys enough. It's been a real pleasure, and you've asked questions I had not even considered, which, of course, makes me really uncomfortable, but really great. If I can dish it out, I gotta be able to take it. So thank you so much for your excellent questions.

B: Thank you for listening to The Leaders Way. We hope you were encouraged and inspired. To learn more about this episode, visit our website at berkeleydivinity.yale.edu/podcast.

H: Rate and review us and follow the podcast to make sure you never miss an episode. Follow Berkeley@Yale on Instagram for quotes from the podcast and more.

B: Until next time...

H: The Lord be with you.