

In-Sacred-Spaces-2

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

sacred spaces, historic black churches, ballroom scene, civil rights, queer liberation, Grace Church, affordable housing, structural issues, womanist theology, love as verb, social justice, interfaith seminary, personal relationship, spiritual journey, community service

SPEAKERS

Colby King, Milan Terlunen, Nigel Pearce, Lisa Pearce, Aya Labanieh

- C** Colby King 00:00
[Music begins.] Welcome to In Sacred Spaces, a three-episode podcast series in which we visit spaces around New York City that are sacred specific communities. These include historic Black churches in Harlem as well as the Chelsea Piers, a gathering place for members of the ballroom scene. There are many kinds of Black churches in the United States, with hundreds of years of history. Ballroom is community of mostly queer and trans performers from Black and Latinx backgrounds, originating in Harlem
- A** Aya Labanieh 00:31
Join us as we walk around these sacred spaces with the people who love them. We discuss their personal journeys with spirituality and how the spaces they've chosen to inhabit connect to longer histories of civil rights, women's equality and queer liberation.
- M** Milan Terlunen 00:52
We hope these conversations will connect with your own experiences, whether you identify as LGBTQ+, as a Christian or as part of any other religious or spiritual community - or none at all. If you can, we encourage you to listen to this podcast while walking around a place that is sacred to you.
- C** Colby King 01:15
Our podcast team includes people with diverse religious backgrounds and a range of racial, sexual and gender identities. You can find out more about the team and the project at our website, insacredspacespodcast.com.

M Milan Terlunen 01:31

We hope these episodes will inspire you to reflect on your own unique relationship to spiritual experience. Throughout each episode, we've included musical interludes composed by Stone Butler, that give you some private moments to meditate on what you've heard.

A Aya Labanieh 01:54

For this episode, we're at Grace Congregational Church of Harlem with Pastor Nigel Pearce and his wife Lisa Pearce. Nigel and Lisa discuss how acting with love shapes everything from their renovation of the church building to the spiritual values of their community.

A Aya Labanieh 02:12

We begin the conversation outside the church on West 139th Street, a quiet side street a few blocks away from where we were for the first episode. It's a morning in early summer, and we're standing in front of a large red brick building with rounded windows, an old oak door and a steep roof that rises high above the surrounding houses. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 02:42

So Nigel and Lisa, it's great to be here with you, and we're out on the street outside of this building. So can you tell us a bit about this building and a bit about the church that is located here?

N Nigel Pearce 03:00

Okay, so you're situated right in Central Harlem. And so Grace Church started on 135th at the YMCA, and they spent 10 years there saving up \$50,000, which I say today is about three and a half million dollars, to purchase, to purchase this building. Remember, folks who were just, you know, either out of slavery or their parents were certainly slaves with nothing, and were able to put together \$50,000 to purchase this building and begin Grace Congregational Church, and then celebrate here. 1923 is when they acquired, so next year is our 100th anniversary here.

M Milan Terlunen 03:49

Yeah, so before we go inside, are there other things that you know we should talk about with this building? Or I know the buildings around are also important to history of this place?

N Nigel Pearce 04:01

Grace Church owns both buildings on both sides, and so we've always provided housing for folks, which has provided additional income for the church. So we've been involved in what we call moderate-income housing and making sure people's living and environment, which is

important to people, right? A home is so important and vital to folks and their lives. And so we wanted to make sure that we preserve the lives of those in this neighborhood and keep rents at a manageable level.

M Milan Terlunen 04:35

Yeah, because rents are increasing dramatically, right?

N Nigel Pearce 04:39

Right. And even if you're on a living wage, \$15 an hour, you can afford to live nowhere in New York City. So it is important that we find a way to take care of people and curb the housing issue and affordability issue that we're finding.

M Milan Terlunen 05:00

Lisa, is there anything else that you want to say about the building, anything about the outside that...?

L Lisa Pearce 05:08

No, I think, I think, I guess, the most important thing for me when I first came to this church was - and it wasn't that long ago, right? It was in 2016. I thought: it feels like home. I was expecting, I didn't know what the church would look like. I, you know, had never, you know, seen it before. And when I got here, it felt like home. And the reason it felt like home is because it's small. It's small. I was expecting, you know, one of these mega churches with lots of people. It's Harlem. [Sound of road drilling in background.] So when I came here, I thought, this is absolutely beautiful, welcoming. Yeah, very much. So I felt, when I walked through the doors, I felt, oh my gosh, there's this sense of peace and tranquility, and that was really important.

M Milan Terlunen 06:04

I feel like the peace and tranquility right now is being a little bit ruined by the road repairs happening. [All laugh.] Shall we continue this in a more peaceful soundscape?

A Aya Labanieh 06:19

[Music begins.] We're now inside the church. We feel small as we look up at the imposing roof. From below, in one corner of the roof, we can see some holes where the plaster and wood have been broken away. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 07:09

So we've come inside, and when I look up towards the ceiling, I'm seeing some areas where the, sort of, the plaster has been broken away, and we can see the brick and the kind of woodwork. So what's, what's going on there?

N

Nigel Pearce 07:28

So I apologize it looks a little disarray, because after Sandy our slate roof was shifted. And so we brought a structural engineer. He said: not only do you need a new roof, but you need a whole new structure to hold up the new roof. And so we, I had to convince the congregation that we probably need to take this whole structure down and build a new one. And so we have a picture of a new building, seven storeys, which would allow us to go from eight units of affordable housing to 42 units of affordable housing.

M

Milan Terlunen 08:02

So the affordable housing in the buildings next door to this, you'd be going from eight to 42 correct? It's a big jump!

N

Nigel Pearce 08:11

It's a big jump, yeah. So we take down the building next to us, we would expand this space here, and then we would go up seven storeys. And so you'll see the pieces that have been cut away were actually the demolition guys who came here and started to see how they were going to dismantle the church. So those were self-imposed, those things, and you'll see others further up on the balcony. But the rest of the ceiling is because of the leaks that we've had, and it's very difficult to repair, very costly to repair, I should say. So we're going to be doing some repairs because we didn't think we'd be in this building as long. We thought by this time we would have been out and construction would have started. But Landmark - we've got landmarked in the midst of our plans, and so that has put us on a hold for a moment. And so we're trying to work with Landmark to figure out, how do we create a new church that fits in but also allows us to be financially well, as well?

L

Lisa Pearce 08:12

You know, I have to say, it has been a difficult process, and as I stand here and come to the church frequently throughout the week, obviously on Sunday, it is so clear to me why so many in the congregation have resisted the idea that we might have to take this building down. Yeah, it's painful to even think about it. And I will never forget, you know, I look at the church now. I'll never forget when we, when, when Pastor, P and I were talking about, you know, our wedding and our reception and all of that stuff. One of our friends said: oh no, you can't get married here, you can't! And she was kind of fussing. And I looked at her and I said: isn't it beautiful, though? And I said to her: my husband sees the church through the eyes of love, and love makes even the things that are falling, you know, in the ceiling, love makes everything beautiful. And so, you know, I look around and I see, you know, the issues, I... Clearly the roof, you know... But it looks so incredibly beautiful, too.

N Nigel Pearce 10:38
Right.

A Aya Labanieh 10:43
[Music begins.] As we walk forward, we see a grand piano ahead of us, and turning back, we see an organ with gleaming pipes on a balcony above. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 11:29
So, so we've got...

N Nigel Pearce 11:32
We've got a baby grand here, and we've got an organ, which the pipes are all in the balcony section. Yeah, all still working. Very much. So in fact, the guy's coming here today to take a look at it. But music was the centerpiece of Grace Church. It was called the Little Opera House of Harlem. Opera House of Harlem. Because our pianist then, Dr Motley, grew up with Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Miles Davis, and he played with all those folks. And so Marian Anderson would come and sing. Duke Ellington lived around the corner. Hall Johnson was a famous, or he put together a lot of the Negro spirituals. And he was very famous for that. And he trained our choir back then in the day. So we had a very amazing, when I got here there was about 30 people in our choir, and it was an amazing choir that were very professionally trained, and they all came and had amazing voices. And you can hear the acoustics in here. You almost don't need a microphone that, you know, the sound travels very well in this room.

M Milan Terlunen 12:37
Yeah. I mean, I feel like since we walked to the front, I'm already hearing more of an echo.

N Nigel Pearce 12:42
Yes.

M Milan Terlunen 12:42
That's clearly a design, right?

N Nigel Pearce 12:44
So people love to sing in this space, and so this was a very important space, and especially

music in this, for this church has always been very center...

M Milan Terlunen 12:54
Yeah, yeah.

N Nigel Pearce 12:54
Centerpiece!

M Milan Terlunen 12:55
Yeah.

A Aya Labanieh 13:07
[Music begins.] On this weekday, we're the only ones inside the building, but it feels like Nigel and Lisa are picturing the church community past, present and future, all gathered in this space. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 13:38
So, Lisa, you you mentioned, you know, looking at this building with, you know, the eyes of love, and how that transforms it. And I think, you know, people might be a bit surprised, just to kind of to hear that this church community itself is, you know, wanting to take down this church and, you know, build something new in its place. So that we're in this space physically, you've been pointing out all these kind of beautiful, precious things about it, and at the same time, you know, you're working towards taking it down, building something new

N Nigel Pearce 14:18
Right.

M Milan Terlunen 14:19
So...

L Lisa Pearce 14:20
What's that about?

M Milan Terlunen 14:21
Yeah, I'm just curious to hear a bit more about that.

L Lisa Pearce 14:24
You know, I think... We want to continue to exist, right? We want to continue to serve the community and live out the Great Commission. So part of it really is about the survival of the church and the work that we do, and unfortunately, where we are right now, we cannot sustain the building. So we have to do something. We have to do something, um...

N Nigel Pearce 15:01
Um, relevant...

L Lisa Pearce 15:01
And do more! Right?

N Nigel Pearce 15:02
Right.

L Lisa Pearce 15:02
We want to do more because there's so many needs around us.

N Nigel Pearce 15:07
Yeah, yeah.

M Milan Terlunen 15:07
Well, I mean, and just concretely, you said going from like eight affordable units to 42 that's already doing more in a really, you know, tangible...

L Lisa Pearce 15:16
... substantial way.

—

N

Nigel Pearce 15:17

And building a church without pews, because we could use this space in so many different ways throughout the week for the community. I know when I first said it, the congregation was like "off with your head", but it made sense when I took them to other churches, like 29th Street, where they turned it into a day for lunch for folks from 11 to 2 and anybody can walk in, and they serve 1800 lunches for people, because they're able to take, there's no pews, they are able to, you know, put tables out and have people. So you can have multi-functional, multi uses when you don't have fixed furniture that really takes up a lot of space, and you can do really anything else with it.

M

Milan Terlunen 15:58

Yeah. So, yeah, I'm hearing that, you know this, this new church that you're wanting to build, it could do more for the community. It could have more functions. It could serve more people more of the time throughout the week.

N

Nigel Pearce 16:13

Yeah, yeah.

M

Milan Terlunen 16:14

Yeah... And maybe that also sort of, to come back to this idea of, like, you know, this idea of love, like, there's, there's, you know, loving this building, loving this place, but there is also, like, loving the people.

C

Colby King 16:30

That's right, yeah. [Cell phone chime.] Right, right.

N

Nigel Pearce 16:34

Mmm-hmm.

L

Lisa Pearce 16:35

Yeah... and sometimes, you know, you have to make hard decisions based on, on, on that love, right?

A

Aya Labanieh 17:05

[Music begins.] We continue walking forward between the rows of wooden pews that have stood here for many years, but might not be here much longer. [Music ends.]

stood here for many years, but might not be here much longer. [MUSIC ENDS.]

M Milan Terlunen 17:30

So, I mean, can we talk a bit more about love, you know, in a theological sense? So, you know, we've been talking about some of the very kind of practical ways that you can show love, like giving people affordable housing

N Nigel Pearce 17:47

Yeah.

M Milan Terlunen 17:48

But I think there is also something more kind of immaterial, more spiritual, that, that love can mean. So I'd love to hear, I'd love to hear the two of you talk a bit more about that.

N Nigel Pearce 17:59

Yeah I think one of the central sermons I preached here early was: love is a verb. And it talks about the one where the woman, who was 18 years bent over and Jesus saw her. And so I talked about: he saw her, he touched her, and he spoke to her. And so love requires those, sort of, three components. Seeing people not for who they are, but who they can be. And so seeing the, you know, we don't want to see with all your warts and all your blemishes, but who you really, truly are is really on the inside. And so love requires us to see people and see through the exterior and into their hearts. But also touching people in a way that makes a profound difference and change in their life.

L Lisa Pearce 18:47

And I'll tell you, I think I have to go back to our first date. And the reason I have to go back there is because...

M Milan Terlunen 18:56

Your first date with... Nigel?

L Lisa Pearce 18:57

With, with, with, yeah, with Pastor P. I had, you know, I went down my list. [All laugh.] I went down my list because, you know, the church has hurt so many people, so many communities, and you know, I wanted to understand where he was theologically, and to ensure that it aligned with my own theology. And so I'll never forget asking him how he felt about the gay

community, for example. I have a dear friend who is gay that I, that I grew up with from childhood, and I said to him, I need to understand how you feel about that, because I believe that where the Bible says that "God so loved the world", that that meant everybody. I have a nephew who is transgender, and I'll never forget when she came and talked to me about what was going on in her life, that she now wanted me to refer to her as Jason, and she explained everything to me, and I looked at him, and I said "Jason, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet", right?

N Nigel Pearce 20:07
Right.

L Lisa Pearce 20:18
And, you know, I think it's important for us to be the people that God... that we believe that God has created us to be. And so it was very important for me to hear what he had to say.

M Milan Terlunen 20:29
Yeah.

L Lisa Pearce 20:30
And so...

N Nigel Pearce 20:34
Cos she was checking off my list! [All laugh.]

L Lisa Pearce 20:34
Hey, right, I had my checklist! And so, oh, the other thing, of course, was I like to dance. So, you know, there are some traditions where, you know, that's a sin. So I needed to understand where he was there. And he was just smiling the whole time.

M Milan Terlunen 20:34
You had a checklist...

L Lisa Pearce 20:34
You know, what does love mean to you?

M Milan Terlunen 20:39
You had the same list.

N Nigel Pearce 20:42
We had the same list. Yeah...

L Lisa Pearce 20:42
Yeah, what does love mean to you?

N Nigel Pearce 20:44
So I was smiling because she was checking off my list at the same time.

L Lisa Pearce 21:02
Yeah. I mean, you know, we're to love all of God's creation.

N Nigel Pearce 21:06
Amen, amen.

L Lisa Pearce 21:08
It's incredibly important, yeah.

M Milan Terlunen 21:10
Well, and that story you were just telling about your family member who's trans, like, it sounds like it connects with what you were saying earlier about like, seeing people for who they are inside. And kind of, you know, at least initially, if the outside doesn't, doesn't match, right, that, you know, you see them the best way they can be.

N Nigel Pearce 21:33
Yeah, yeah.

A Aya Labanieh 21:45

[Music begins.] As we get close to the front, we take care to avoid tripping over the cables that run between various microphones, lights, video cameras and a huge sound mixing board. Since the pandemic began, this equipment has allowed hundreds of people to attend the Sunday services at Grace Church. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 22:32

I wanted to ask a bit about womanist theology, because I know that's something that you know a lot about, have a history with. And Reverend Derrick McQueen mentioned it briefly in our previous conversation. But yeah, I would love to hear a bit more, like for people who don't know about it, what is it and what's your, what's your history with it?

L Lisa Pearce 22:56

So when I went through seminary, it really was when I was introduced to womanist theology. I worked with the Reverend Dr Katie Cannon, who was an ethicist, a womanist ethicist, and really started to understand... It really was a response to Black theology, which was predominantly... it rested and anchored in the experiences of Black men, feminist theology of white women. So womanist theology really was about centering the experiences of Black women and using that as the foundation and anchor upon which you, upon which you live, live your life and live in the world. But it also means and encompasses and includes everyone, right? So it doesn't matter who you are, and it's all about what we've really been talking about, that it's an inclusive kind of theology that, that loves everyone, and it really is at the heart of the way I think about my own theology and, and the work that we do in the church.

M Milan Terlunen 24:14

Can you spell that out a bit more just, so, what does centering Black women do to how we understand the love that we've already been talking about?

L Lisa Pearce 24:26

Yeah, so when you think about the Black woman's experiences in America, one of the things that we know is that during slavery, families were torn apart, and so Black women found themselves in a space where they had to embrace children that may or may not have been their own, right, and that was at the heart of building community that we're all here, you're all loved. One of the things that Dr Katie Cannon does, she tells us, she used to tell this beautiful story about one of her ancestors who, when slavery was abolished, who went around to every plantation, and she found her children and said, "Yep, that one is mine, and that one is mine, and that one is mine", and then embrace children whose parents, you know, who were just kind of orphans. That's what we've done. That's what we continue to do.



M Milan Terlunen 25:29
So, so not biologically hers but just anyone...

L Lisa Pearce 25:30
No, yeah, that's what we've done. That's what we've always done. In communities, when children didn't have places to go and food, we come together. I mean, the Black church was at the center of everything that we did, and Black women were just out there trying to make a difference. And that all comes from a place of love. You know, we've got to get there together, so everybody come and be a part of this community of love.

M Milan Terlunen 26:01
But yeah, not, not a kind of, like, nice, fuzzy love, like, it's a love that really is...

N Nigel Pearce 26:08
Right

M Milan Terlunen 26:08
... in a situation that is so terrible...

L Lisa Pearce 26:11
Right.

M Milan Terlunen 26:11
... you know, finding it even there.

N Nigel Pearce 26:13
And finding love even when you've been treated in a very difficult and harsh manner.

L Lisa Pearce 26:19
Right.

N Nigel Pearce 26:19

N Nigel Pearce 20:19

How do you, where do you get that love to treat others kind, still, when you've been treated so harshly?

A Aya Labanieh 27:11

[Music begins.] We take a few steps up towards the altar. Today it looks like an empty stage, but every Sunday it's the focal point for music, ritual and prayer. [Music ends.]

M Milan Terlunen 27:26

So you mentioned that you both came from other denominations, other kinds of Christianity, before arriving here. And I'm curious to hear, maybe specifically with this idea of kind of love being so central to the theology here and to the community here, you know, how is that different from other churches you've been a part of? Or maybe, how is some of the things that you've brought from those earlier churches to the community here?

N Nigel Pearce 28:02

So I've had a circuitous route, sort of, to... [Laughter.] ... to pastoring Grace Church. But, you know, I started out, grew up Catholic, which had a very, you know... I almost saw God as this old white man waiting for you to do something wrong. And then going to the Pentecostal Church, which was all about the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, and, and just much more open and free, but also alive. And then two years of being a Baptist minister helped me to, you know, I... And I got there because Dr King, and I could see what social justice... And that made a difference, that you could actually help people by, by preaching and speaking to people in a way that showed them a more loving, more excellent way. And so that's got me on the path, and then that led me to Gandhi and his, his love, and how he was able to transform a country in India by, by, by non-violent, right, revolt. And, and that led me to Sufism and, and Tagore and Rumi. And so I ended up in an interfaith seminary, which you...

M Milan Terlunen 29:19

So interfaith, not just Christian?

N Nigel Pearce 29:21

Right.

M Milan Terlunen 29:21

Okay.

N

Nigel Pearce 29:22

So you practice Hinduism with a Hindu priest. You go to Islam, Islam, and you practice with a iman, and you know the Jews, and we go to see a rabbi, and we spend time to learn their religion. And the belief there is that there's only one divine and you have many paths, right, which was very different than I grew up with in the Catholic sense, where it was just Christians and nobody else. But here it was: there was one divine and many paths. And so for me, that was much more appealing to me and much more loving that, you know, everybody has access to the divine. And that's really what opened me up to the, more, concept of love and really a much more kinder Christian faith than I had before.

M

Milan Terlunen 30:13

How about you, Lisa?

L

Lisa Pearce 30:16

So I grew up in the Baptist tradition, and I grew up in what's called a "fire and brimstone" church. And I was scared of God. I did not see God as loving or any of those things. And it's interesting, because I... and both of my, both of my parents are pastors. My father recently passed away. My mother's the pastor of a church in Virginia. And so what happened to me is, you know, I hit that first rough patch in my life, and it was just horribly painful, and I found my way back to God. But I had to deconstruct everything I had... I knew about God, and reconstruct God in a way that was more loving. And it's, you know, the elders knew, I could see it on their faces. I look back on my... And so they knew something that I didn't know, that I wasn't getting from the experience I had in the church, and the reason that I kept going back, obviously, I didn't have any choice, really, but there was so much love there. The action was there, you know, my grandmother and my aunties and everybody, so you felt the love. But in the pulpit, you know, a preacher was, you know, telling us "you gotta do this and don't do that, and you're going to hell if you do this" and all of that stuff. So I've had a wonderfully expansive definition of love since, since those you know, since those days when I was a child.

M

Milan Terlunen 31:59

You mentioned having a gay friend from childhood. So was that also something that sort of took a while to kind of find that theology that would...

L

Lisa Pearce 32:10

Embrace, embrace him.

M

Milan Terlunen 32:11

Yeah.

L

Lisa Pearce 32:12

Right. So yeah and I, and that's another reason why I was just like, "Who is this God over here?", because I loved my friend, and I knew that God loved him, right? But that wasn't the God that was over at the church that I was in. So, you know, sometimes at one point I said, "Oh my gosh, I feel like I'm schizophrenic. There are all these things that are, that don't make any sense to me. How do I reconcile all of this so that I, you know, I come out whole?" So again, it was just, it was a process.

A

Aya Labanieh 33:04

[Music begins.] As we feel our time coming to an end, we turn back to face the whole church and watch the light stream in from outside. [Music ends.]

M

Milan Terlunen 33:42

So I mean, I feel like one big thing that I've been getting from this conversation is, like, that your own theology is something that you yourself can, can, you know, that it's a long journey to arrive at something that you feel really happy with and that matches your values, and that, you know... I think that maybe a lot of people think that theology is something that is kind of, like, given to them, and you either accept it or you reject it. And maybe especially LGBTQ+ people have sometimes felt like theology is a sort of, like, you know, like, a stick to hit them with. Whereas you two both kind of, you've really gone out and found the elements in different theologies that really sort of, you know, match your values, match what you believe in.

N

Nigel Pearce 34:35

And feel right to us, right to have that feeling about God, that intimacy with God and, and so our spiritual life has all been about a walk, a walk with a divine. And so there's a divine spark in all of us that we have to nurture. And so the mystics, for me, speak of, you know, St Francis of Assisi and Theresa Avila, who had this connection with God that was so intimate and so loving. That that's how... And you know, I always say every preacher has really one sermon. It may sound different, they may use a different text, but it's one sermon. And mine's always about the intimacy with God that each and every one has to have a personal relationship with God and, and so walk in the spiritual journey. I mean, that's, that's really what we want to help people do.

M

Milan Terlunen 35:31

Does that resonate with you as well?

L

Lisa Pearce 35:33

It really does. God is love. You just said it. God is love. Anytime you see something in the world, all you have to ask yourself is: "Does that align with a God who is love?" It's really quite simple.

And that, that I think takes you and gets you to the right place.

M Milan Terlunen 35:56

Well, Nigel and Lisa, thank you so much. It's been wonderful.

A Aya Labanieh 36:00

[Music begins.] That's the end of the episode, but it's not the end of the conversation. We'll now leave you with a little more music to reflect on everything you've heard.

M Milan Terlunen 36:53

We'd love to hear your response to this episode. If you have thoughts or stories to share, please send an email or, even better, a voice note to team@insacredspacespodcast.com

A Aya Labanieh 37:09

This podcast was produced by Olivia Branscum, Colby King, Milan Terlunen and me, Aya Labanieh.

C Colby King 37:17

With musical compositions by Stone Butler and technical support from Evan Li and Ana Maria Rodriguez,

A Aya Labanieh 37:23

Thanks to our speakers and to the church and ballroom communities for inviting us into their spaces. Thanks also to María González Pendás and Chris Chang for their mentorship, and to Humanities NY and Columbia's Heyman Center for the Humanities for their support.

M Milan Terlunen 37:40

And most of all, thank you for listening. [Music ends.]