



# Transcript

## *Means of Grace*

### Episode 90

**Speaker:** 00:04

Welcome to Means Of Grace, a podcast produced by The Western North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church.

**Kim Ingram** 01:55

Welcome to the Means Of Grace Podcast. I'm Kim Ingram, one of your hosts and I'm the Director of Ministerial Services for The western North Carolina Conference.

**Jesse Ennis** 02:03

And I'm Jesse Ennis, and the Director of Communications for the Leadership Development Team of our conference as well.

**Kim Ingram** 02:11

We are glad that you are joining us for this episode of the Means Of Grace podcast and we welcome as our guest today, the Reverend Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun. Susan is becoming the pastor of Christ United Methodist Church in Charlotte on September 1. She has been serving over her career as an Associate Minister in larger churches, as the pastor of a two point charge and as the pastor of station churches, so she has a lot of varied experiences in her leadership. She's with us today as part of our series highlighting the work and learning that Western North Carolina clergy have done when pursuing their Doctor of Ministry degree. Susan received her D-Min from Hood Theological Seminary. Susan, your project was



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called “Remembering the Body of Christ”, and its purpose was to help a local church implement social justice and change. And we are excited to learn more about what you learned, and how you've implemented it through your ministry. Welcome.

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 03:08

Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

**Kim Ingram** 03:12

I wonder if you can just begin by telling us a little bit about this topic. How did you choose it? And how did you go about studying it?

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 03:17

This project actually became an extension of my M-Div work. So I went to Union Theological Seminary in New York City. I went there to specifically study liberation theology, and I wanted to be in a room with Dr. James Cohn. And thankfully, I got to do that. And we had to as a part of our M-Div work at Union, we had to do a large paper. And so my paper was in theology, and it was on disability theology. And I had started doing some work around disability theology because of an experience that I had. When I was in college, I did work in the summers. And when I came home with a young woman who was severely, who is, she still is severely autistic, and had a diagnosis. I don't know if they still use this diagnosis, terminology, but at that time, it was a diagnosis of mental retardation. And so I worked with her and, and talking with her family, and this was in Charlotte, I discovered that her family did not go to church. And it was because there was not a church that really welcomed them. They had even had experiences in a church



where it's so hard to believe, but they actually got responses as if this young woman had autism because of a sin of the parents like that was still communicated to them. And it bothered me so much that I just wanted to dive into understanding our reaction, our response as a church to persons with differing abilities, and so my work at Union was on the dismembered body, a body that is torn apart. So I really was fascinated with this idea of the dismembered body of Christ, which had me really look at Paul's letter to the Corinthian church about being the body and being whole, and all the parts working together. And that when one part is not there, when one part is missing, when one part is hurt, then the body does not function. And I also began thinking about how we talk about the broken body of Christ. And we use that theological understanding that communion, and each person is given a piece of the body of the bread, and we carry that piece with us in us, and that when we all come together, and we work together, that that brokenness is brought back together as a whole. So my D-Min work, I wanted to continue that, but I didn't want it to just be head thought I wanted it to be actual work in a church, which is why like, pursuing D-Min versus a PhD, so I can see, can the church really flesh out an understanding of social justice, not just missions, but social justice, for the sake of re-membering, rejoining the broken body of Christ?

**Kim Ingram** 06:11

Wow, what a great thing to participate in over some period of time where you've done study in a more specific area, but even the liberation theology probably opened your eyes and your mind to some new ways of thinking, and then to revisit it and kind of pick it back up in a new way. And yet continuing the study that you had already done. And in fact, you've given me ideas for more podcasts



that we can have conversations with you about, because you've done a deep dive in several different areas. But we'll stick with the point of today for this one. And so I wonder, then you use your current context, I think when you were doing your D-Min, you said you wanted to see how it would kind of flush out in a congregation. And I wonder what you learned about connecting a church to concerns about justice in their community? What did you learn, kind of around that, and how it gets lived out?

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 06:59

So interestingly enough, I worked on my D-Min in two contexts. So I began my D-Min project at First Church, Gastonia, large church, very active in missions and outreach. There was no doubt about that, that church had that as a part of their DNA. And then my final year, my D-Min project was moved to a two point charge and Denver rural, which is more rural. I mean, it's getting less rural, but it felt very, for me, it felt very rural, two very small congregations. And I learned a lot. It was still early on in my ministry, I learned, we've not done a great job with teaching people the difference between missions and justice. The mission piece we do so well, United Methodists, do so, so well. And then I think we sometimes fall short on the justice piece, because it's hard. It's very hard. United Methodist Women have always done a really great job with the justice piece. But local churches have not. And so when I started talking with churches about justice versus mission, I realized we had a lot to learn, we had a lot to understand, we had a lot to understand where it comes from, biblically, theologically, denominationally, and how it is a part of our Christian identity. And I had to learn to listen to the congregations because what I wanted to do social justice wise wasn't necessarily what they wanted to do. And so we had to walk that road together. In order to



move forward, we had to really listen and have honest conversations with each other.

**Jesse Ennis** 08:37

So Susan, you mentioned that there's a difference between missions and justice. We do missions very well. So it seems like we've gotten a pretty good handle on that. What is justice? From your perspective?

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 08:49

Yeah, so justice. One is not better than the other, I don't think, like so when I think about missions, I think that's the way we feed people. That's the way we are filling backpacks for kids in school. You know, at Divine Church, we did sandwiches twice a month to take down to a roof above so that there were people living in tents on streets, that they got food that is necessary, vital, important, hands and feet of Christ work. Absolutely. Justice then begins to think about why is it that children don't have necessary school supplies? We start to ask those questions. Why is it that we have so many people living in tents and not able to sustain housing or be in housing? Why is it that there's not affordable housing in the city of Charlotte? So justice begins to poke at those, those tougher questions, which is hard because we then find that those are wrapped around a lot of other mechanisms within our world, within our social dynamics, within government, within polity, within procedure. So what we've done is because we've grown up, right, you don't talk about religion and politics at the table, right? Well, we don't talk about it at church either. And what has happened though, is we haven't learned how to talk. So instead, we've, we have failed to have this conversation, and to realize that churches do have an influence, and some of those major



injustices in our communities, whether they're rural, or whether they're suburban, or we're city dwelling, that we have the ability to make some changes.

**Kim Ingram** 10:37

Yeah, we have an influence, we also have a responsibility. And sometimes we actually have a history of creating the problem, or being part of the systems that create the problem. And just the thing that immediately came to my mind was, when Martin Luther King wrote a letter from the Birmingham Jail and ambition, one of our United Methodist bishops was one of the recipients of that letter, and was being accused, like of creating the problem and continuing the oppression and the injustices. And I agree that I think it's, it's hard. And it's hard, because the systems are so big, that it's hard to figure out how to change them. But it also is hard because it can be so controversial.

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 11:20

So controversial. And it is, it's the slow and steady work. There's not always that instant gratification. Like when you fill a book bag, you feel good about yourself, right? Like I feel good about myself, when I make sandwiches and I take them like oh, and the Justice stuff, you don't get that you don't get that immediately. You don't see it necessarily immediately. It might take years and years. And I think pastors and laity in the churches that are doing justice work, there is a sense of letting your faith be in that space of the slow and steady work of God, like knowing that God is working in that. And it might be a while before the harvest comes. But God promises us that we come and if we continue to be faithful with it.



**Jesse Ennis** 12:09

So I had a very interesting thought today. And if this is too wild, we'll take it out of the podcast. But I was thinking about Superman, and how if he was really, truly super, and really about justice, it would be more, it wouldn't be so much about stopping bad guys, but finding out why they chose that path of villainy anyway. And it sounds to me like what when you talk about justice, what you're talking about is trying to find those systems of oppression that have forced people into patterns of living that they might not have chosen otherwise, but there is real systematic change that needs to be made to address why is it that someone needs a backpack and resources? Why is it that they haven't been able to afford those things on their own? Why is it that we need to find help for the homeless? It sounds like you're digging even deeper into that. And like you said, that is very slow work. And so in a comic book, that would be a very boring story for children and teenagers.

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 13:18

And he probably wouldn't get to wear a cool suit. So yeah, we wrestle a little bit with our ego, I think on some of this, too, because I think some of the justice work is not as glitzy and glamorous that you don't get to swoop in and, and put on your web page like this is how many people I got out of systemic, you know, racism today, like, that doesn't show up as much as we made 600 sandwiches to give to the hungry people on the street. So we have to call out our desire to have this suit on and the cape a lot, too.



**Jesse Ennis** 13:50

Absolutely. So I think given the fact that we've grown up in a church that's very much focused on missions, and like we said, that's very important. And we've grown up with this in this culture that shows us that type of justice and a type of way of calling, dealing with these things now that we've unearthed the true nature of things in the way that we should be dealing with them. If there's a leader who's listening to this podcast, who has a heart for what we're talking about this is true justice, but doesn't know where to begin the conversation in their settings, specifically, what would you suggest?

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 14:28

I think the first thing that comes to my mind is to listen to our people. Because I think back on and I've been so fortunate to serve in so many different contexts. And there is not a context, there's not a church that I've been in where somebody hasn't come to me to tell me about something, someone that touches their hearts, that is a part of their life, that there is not a justice topic. There's not a justice and an injustice around that, I've been in rural churches where I had a couple who had a son who lived with AIDS. That became our justice topic. Because it was, it was part of who they were. I went to a church that really had a love and a desire and a heart for persons with disabilities. They built a UMAR house, that was a part of who they were, it was already there. So I tried to listen to the stories of the people that I'm in ministry with, because my passions for social justice are not always going to be the passions of my church. And that's okay. But where there's justice, we can find, we can find a place to do some work, and we can find a place of agreement and love and, and let's get to it. So I would say to pastors or lay leaders, listen, then discover what it is that your church really has a



heart for. So at The Vine, that was a church that was really centered around children and daycare, and I would say, you know, we can't all be the uptown church that has a homeless population living on your steps. And I say that because maybe it's just as a pastor, I often feel like, Oh, I've got to be that church, I've got to be like, First Charlotte, or I've got to be like Haywood Street, awesome churches doing amazing, awesome things. But that was not my context at The Vine. Our context was, we had young adults who were working full time who needed childcare. And that was an issue. If you don't think childcare is a justice issue right now, that is an issue. And if you don't think childcare workers getting paid fair wages is a justice issue, it is. That's where we did our work. So we made sure that teachers' salaries were increased, and that we were paying teachers way above what they would be paid anywhere else. So there are justice issues.

Wherever we are, we have to tap into that and be in our context, listening to what, where the people are and what touches the people's hearts, and then go in that direction. I look forward to seeing what Christ is, where their heart is going to be with that. But it takes some listening. And before jumping in and pushing the church into a particular direction. It's always much easier to listen to where their heart is, and go, sometimes slowly. And sometimes we go too slow too, because this is not easy. And I would be a liar. If I said that. Oh, yes, I get up every Sunday in the pulpit. And I preach everything that James Cohn taught me to preach. You know, that's, that is not it. There are many Sundays where I'm a chicken. And I don't, I am scared to say some things that I need to say. And I confess at The Vine we fell short, I fell short of responding to Black Lives Matter quicker. We missed a window. We missed that window in a big way. And there were things that we did after, but I think it was too late. So there are times when I've missed the mark, when I have not spoken up because it is hard. It's hard to get the critique and the



feedback, which is sometimes just so silly, but usually as pastors we like to be liked. And it's hard. So I just want to say that to acknowledge that. It's not like I'm standing up every Sunday. And, you know, speaking on every social justice issue every week when maybe I should, but it's hard. It's hard work.

**Kim Ingram** 18:35

Well, our listeners can't see what t-shirt you happen to wear today. And you said it wasn't even intentional. But it says you can get in trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble. And it just goes along with what you were just saying. I think that sometimes leaders feel like when they do speak up about a justice issue, they are getting in trouble. And it doesn't always feel like good and necessary trouble. And so that makes it hard. And unmix leaders are uncertain about whether you kind of press forward or not. I know I've heard leaders and pastors talk about people that leave the church, because they say that their sermons are too political. And yet, they weren't really preaching about politics at all. It's just that there is significant overlap, I think, between the concerns of the community and the needs of people. And the ways that you meet those needs, sometimes feel like there are various sides of an issue that then it feels or becomes or sounds political. Do you have any kind of advice or wisdom or even just personal experience around if a leader wants to address an issue, kind of how something that's on their heart or in their community, like you said, even Black Lives Matter would have been seen as political or some leaders to get up and talk about it, when it was kind of at its height of concern not that it's not so terribly important now. So anyway, do you have any, any thoughts or wisdom on that?



**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 20:06

Yeah, I said, put it on Jesus. I mean, like, I don't know how, and I certainly would entertain the conversation. But I don't know how we can read the gospels and not see that Jesus got in trouble, got in good trouble, got in necessary trouble. And it was political. He did things that called out systemic injustice. And, first of all, it's not my first Sunday sermon, usually with a congregation, we still are pastors going in and serving people and loving people. And I say, when there have been people that have come to me, when I did my D-Min project, the feedback I got was, you know, you shouldn't be doing this, you should stick to teaching the Bible, which I just think is so funny. I said, Okay, well, we'll do that. Just get ready. Because the Bible is gonna knock your socks off on some of this stuff. Like, you know, the prophets had a lot to say about injustice. So I usually want to ask them, tell me more about what you mean by that, or tell me, I need to hear more of that. Well, we are in churches, and we are prophetic. And we are preachers, we are also pastors. And at least in my opinion, I have to wrap all of that up. So if there's someone that is having difficulty with things that we're doing or talking about, I want to hear more about why that is. And usually, there's a story there. I think everybody has a story. And usually there's some woundedness in that story. And if we can talk through that, and talk about that, and journey together and love and respect and compassion for one another, then I think it usually goes well, usually, if I have preached something, and I had, I've had a time where I did not preach, I preached for myself. And I was called out by a staff member, thank goodness, she called me out. And I needed to be called out. When we preach for ourselves, it doesn't usually go well, when I have preached from the Bible, it might rub on some people, but their rub is with Jesus, not as much necessarily with me, so I can let that personal part go. And we can talk about how Jesus is rubbing us of all



because there's stuff that Jesus does, that rubs me the wrong way, too. There's some things that Jesus said that I wish I wish he wouldn't have, because it would have made things a little bit easier for us, you know, to be to be really grounded in in the Bible to be really grounded in our exegetical work, and to make sure that we've got people around us, encouraging us and reminding us that we're not in this alone, as pastors that, you know, maybe we're doing a justice work with a cluster of churches. So it's not just one church, I always find that when, when my church people hear that there's another pastor talking about, it's like, oh, she's not just the only crazy person like they're all talking about this. So it helps for us to support one another and encourage one another.

**Jesse Ennis** 22:58

Absolutely. If they're looking for another crazy pastor, send them to my church, and I will gladly preach that same message to them. So you talked about stories, and how much you have focused on listening. And it sounds like that's been one of the primary ways that you have gone about doing this justice work, is listening to folks. And I find that personally, I learned a lot more from my failures and the failures of others than from stories about successes. But I do want to hear about your successes as well. But could we start with maybe a failure or a time when the barriers were too great, like, what type of failures have you seen as you've done this work?

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 23:43

Sometimes when I think about there being failures, it's often that it's still in the works. But I would say that the failures or the growth areas, maybe that's maybe makes me feel a little bit better have been with individuals who just feel like it's



too much like we're rubbing, we're pulling everything out from underneath them, and where I've gone too fast, where I haven't taken the time to really listen to people, to hear their story. So I have learned in my going on 22 years of this, that when I have moved too fast or too ahead of people that has not worked, when I have wanted it to be my agenda versus letting it come from the people. That doesn't mean that I'm not leading and guiding or setting some kind of vision, but I just for me, it works better if it comes from them. And when I haven't let it come from the people, it's never worked out well. It usually gains no momentum. People won't sign up to help out with anything. They will be involved with it. And it just doesn't. It just doesn't go anywhere. So like I said, the opportunities missed. I would say that those were big failures for me. Like just missing those opportunities, whether it was out of fear, whether it was out of we've got things going on and we just don't have time or, or I just don't know if people are going to get into this or how they're going to respond. But missed opportunities, I think the world is changing so quickly now, people are looking for the church to say something. And when we don't, then we've missed an opportunity. What about a story of success? You know, there's small, like, when people at The Vine raised teacher salaries, because they knew that was the right thing to do. It was when the Inclusion Community got out with signs one day and displayed their love for LGBTQ people that they wanted to make sure that the community around them knew there was a church for them. It was when a small church in more of a rural area took up the quest to help out with World AIDS Day, or walk in the crosswalk, or wrote letters to try to end world hunger, or build a UMAR house. When I've had church people, I deem this as a success. It involves one person in a church of over 2000. I took a group of people to Nicaragua. And when we went to Nicaragua, we tried really hard to not just go and do a bunch of service and then leave. We tried



to make connections and I had a member of the church go with me. And he had never been anywhere like Nicaragua. And we would have been complete opposites of the theological spectrum and political spectrum probably too. And we were on a truck going out to our worksite. And we passed what was a sweatshop. It was a t-shirt factory. And he was wondering what that was, and we had a translator with us. And the translator was saying, Oh, that's a place where people go and they make T-shirts, and they don't get paid very much. And the guy from the church was like, that doesn't really happen. Like he really did not believe that that happened. And we stopped and he saw it. And it completely changed him. That was a life changing moment for him like that totally flipped a switch on how he believes we should buy goods. And then he began to look at, where do our goods come from? And, you know, moments like that. They're not, if it's just one person, it changes things. I mean, I have to have faith and believe that it changes things.

**Jesse Ennis** 27:33

So I feel like you started by saying that these are all little things. And then to me, you've listed a lot of big things. And I feel this same pattern, we had a conversation with Joel Simpson as well. And he did the exact same thing. He was like, you know, it's a million little things. And I'm listening to these little things and thinking, Man, these are some big things that you guys are listening. So right on, keep going.

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 28:00

It's amazing what churches are doing. And I think there's a lot more that churches are doing that we don't even know about, that they're doing some amazing stuff.



They're engaged with getting people to vote. I mean, I've heard of small churches going out and making sure people have rides to get there. And then they're asking, why, why is this so hard for some people to get there. And then when we were at Gastonia, we discovered how difficult it was for people to receive services that they couldn't just jump in a car and get services from one location that they had to go all around town. And if they didn't have a car, that could take them a week to go and find services that they needed, and, and that they couldn't get IDs. I mean, so I think there's stuff happening. I bet if we got churches together, and we helped them understand the difference between missions and justice, and where they were tapping into justice. I bet we could be amazed at what was happening out there. I would hope so. I think there's some good stuff happening.

**Kim Ingram** 28:59

Yeah, I think a lot about telling the story. It made me think about COVID, when they were doing vaccination clinics and sites and churches in Charlotte, I guess I wasn't part of it. But just in kind of reading a little bit about it, you know, kind of working together to offer vaccination clinics in some of our United Methodist churches in areas where people wouldn't necessarily have had access to the vaccinations. And I mean, that that is justice and being sure that the underserved people get the same kind of thing that people like me can drive to Walgreens and make an appointment and get and so yeah, I just don't not sure we tell the like you said, tell the stories enough. And then I wonder if we, if we did do a better job of that or what that looks like that justice might be a point of entry into a body of Christ caring community of faith. Traditionally, worship has been kind of that point of entry. And it seems like the efforts of churches have been at least in the past often how do you get people into worship? But I think that I mean, even



COVID, post COVID tells us that may not be the primary place people begin at least in a connection with the church. And for younger people who often have so much passion and advocacy in their bones for justice, I wonder if churches could capitalize on that part of our story and who we are as a connecting point with people that don't know Jesus and don't have a relationship in the body of Christ. Do you have any thoughts about that?

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 30:21

I would say yes. Everything you just said yes. Like, I suspect there are people waiting for churches, to give them the door to come in and do justice issues and justice work. And my assumption is people that are not connected to church would be pleasantly surprised to know like this, this is the work of Jesus? Okay, well, I can, I can be about that, then like, that's not the Jesus I hear the world talk like, because we've let the media kind of claim Jesus' word, which has not been great. Always. So I just imagine that there are people that when they hear that their church is doing some, some really good justice work, that they want to be a part of that. And I've seen that happen. I was a part of a church in New York City that was heavily involved in justice work. And that's how many people came there for that. I mean, worship was awesome. But that was their entry, their door was in for the justice work. And if we in the churches would do that, yeah, again, see, I think it's an ego thing for us, we have to, like, let the ego down. That means that they're not listening to us preach for 20 minutes. Like instead that we're engaging hands and feet into the work of Christ and forming disciples. Not that that doesn't happen on worship, all the time. But I think that could be an incredible door for churches to open up wide. And they would really encounter some eager people, because I still think the church is the vehicle in the world that can get stuff done.



Like I know, there's other civic organizations that get a lot of stuff done, still say the church can do it, and can do it. When we do it well, when we do it, grounded in Scripture, when we do it, kind of with that grace that God gives us. I think incredible things could happen.

**Jesse Ennis** 32:11

Well, I just want to say thank you so much. I think we've learned so much from your stories and from your experiences and from the work that you've done academically and also the work that you've done in and for the church. And I personally am very inspired and, and learned a lot today about the difference between mission and justice and, and the ways of listening to people and, and finding ways to motivate others to see things differently and also to live into the calling that Christ has placed on all of us. So I just want to say thank you for your time and continue on in that good work, continue motivating us to continue in that work as well. And we will continue to let justice flow like a river.

**Rev. Dr. Susan Heafner-Heun** 32:54

Yeah, amen. Amen. Thank you for helping me remember this work and remember my call and remember all of our participation and remembering the body of Christ.

**Speaker:** Thank you for listening to [Means of Grace](#), a podcast produced by the [Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church](#). We hope you enjoyed listening to these podcast and use them as a way to stay connected to our community. Remember to subscribe to Means of Grace for free on [Apple Podcast](#), [Spotify](#) or wherever you get your podcasts. Please leave us an honest rating and a review. It helps others find this podcast. Follow the WNCC on



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