



The TikTok Pastor:
A Conversation with Bethany Peerbolte
February 8, 2024



Transcript

Sara Hayden: Bethany, thank you so much for being here today, and welcome to this conversation.

Bethany Peerbolte: Thank you. It's... I'm excited to be here and chat.

Sara: Yeah, it's fun to have you live because I've heard so many wonderful things from you.

Bethany: Well, I'll, I'll give you kudos for calling this live.

Sara: Okay. (laughing)

Bethany: Yeah, we are still on the internet. But I give you kudos because a lot of people are like, "This doesn't count." So yes, we have now met. And this counts now.

Sara: Yeah, that's right – so many different ways to react and respond to the world we live in right now. And one of the things that makes me so excited about having this conversation with you is that you had, several years ago, a rather outstanding experience, I think, especially for progressive clergy, that catapulted you to becoming a very public representative of Christianity in general, as a clergy person, and I'd love to start there.

Bethany: Yeah. So the pandemic has been th- the beginning of lots of people's stories, um, lately. That's where mine begins as well. I was calling around to the youth group that I was pastor of at the time, just to check in and I started hearing them talk about things like, "Do you think I'm a lukewarm Christian? What about hell? What about... Can I do this?" And I'm like, "This is not what you're hearing from sermons or youth group time. Like, where are you hearing these words?" And they were like, "It's TikTok."

Sara: Wow.

Bethany: Now, I had been on TikTok for a while, because I wanted to just kind of see what they were watching. I knew that it was becoming a big thing. But I had never come across any Christian content. That's how good the algorithm is. That algorithm was like, this pastor...

Sara: (laughing)

Bethany: ... does not want to hear this nonsense. So I had to go looking for it.

Sara: Wow.

Bethany: I typed in, you know, hell, Christianity, whatever. What I found was abysmal; very emotionally manipulative, very focused on hell, and making sure you're saved. Very "get out there and tell people about Jesus or else they're gonna go to hell," like, "this is all on your shoulders." It broke my heart...

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: ... that that is what most Gen Z were hearing. And I know that it's also what Millennials have heard and X, you know, I know that this is not a new branch of Christianity. But to see it so in your face was heartbreaking. So I made a video. I say it was mama bear pastor.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: No one's gonna send my kids to hell without me at least saying something.

Sara: (laughs)

Bethany: So I made a video, and-

Sara: A TikTok video?

Bethany: A TikTok video, yeah. It was, like, maybe eight seconds.

Sara: Okay. This, to me, one of the most courageous things; because I can't imagine myself making one. I think I'm just like, a little bit farther away from the tool. And I love TikTok. There's hilarious things out there that match the horrible things that we see and that you're speaking of. The idea that you created this and posted it: did you have any trepidation? Are you like, you were on fire for these kids and-

Bethany: Oh yeah. I was so worried that I was gonna go into youth group or, like, to see the kids the next week, and they were gonna be like, "You're so cringey, please stop."

Sara: (laughs)

Bethany: I was like, "Oh, no, I'm getting into their world a little bit too close". But they didn't. And the more I made, the more I kinda got used to putting my face out there and seeing what people said. The first video that went viral...when I got 10,000 views, I was like, "Oh my gosh," then I got 100,000. Then I got a million. Then I got 2 million. Those are views. Those are people watching it.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: Then I had lots of people liking it. And lots of people commenting and what it was, was the sound that was going viral about a woman singing just "I know, I know, I know, I know." And everyone was making these like, roll your eyes kinda videos. Well, I had a transgender stole. And the video said, on the bottom, "Hey, Pastor, do you know that that's the Transgender Pride flag?" And then the song was, "I know, I know, I know," like, that is why I'm wearing it. I am wearing it because part of my yoke that I wear as a pastor here is to support and represent transgender Christians, and make sure that they're visible. People's minds were blown.

Sara: Wow.

Bethany: They were like, "A pastor can support transgender people?" And many of them were blown away because I was a female pastor.

Sara: Wow.

Bethany: Which we have been doing that for over 60 years. I'm like, how have we been so terrible at telling people who we are, that this is still a shocking thing for people to see?

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: So that was the first time that I was like, okay, people need some kind of message. People who are not in churches, who have been hurt by churches are willing to say, "Hey, I'm really glad you exist now."

Sara: Mm.

Bethany: "You know, I'm really glad you're there now. I'm really..." They're never coming back to church, probably. They're not gonna say that they're Christian again, but at least they're saying, "Oh, something is happening for this next generation."

Sara: Right.

Bethany: So that was the start, then started going live and started meeting people and seeing people in my comments multiple times. And then they were like, "We wanna do a Bible study." And I was like, "Okay," and then they're like, "We wanna do another one." And I was like, "Okay." And that just kinda builds as I've learned what they need, and they say what they want. So now we have Our Tapestry, which is completely in digital spaces. We meet on Zoom every Tuesday. We do worships and things in different ways. I do one on one pastoral care calls, like, it's just church online.

Sara: Wow. I want to come back to that, too. I want to come back to the experience of starting and continuing this ministry online, this new worshiping community online, and I want to unpack, if it's okay, a little bit more about some of the themes that I've heard you speak about and respond to on TikTok.

Bethany: Absolutely.

Sara: You know, one thing I came across, which I thought was really interesting, was a very practical and gentle description of religion that you make. And I find that it's difficult to curate a conversation online, where you are saying provocative things for some people, and also things that are fairly subdued. (laughs) And what I'm getting at, I don't know if you remember this post, but there was a post of like, "are faith and religion the same thing?" Or "what's the difference between faith and religion?" And you were offering the perspective that you can be faithful without being a religious person. But you also describe how religion comes up from the people in a very natural, practical way.

Bethany: That was one of my, uh, lives. I was talking to lives and then I clipped a couple of moments out of it.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: So, someone had come into the comment while I was live, and a live is essentially, I have a camera on me and there's comments coming rolling in from the bottom up, so I can see people making comments. They're all screen names. So, it's not like I know exactly who's behind all these names.

Sara: But you're public?

Bethany: Oh, yeah.

Sara: Yeah. It's going straight out there. It's not editable at that point.

Bethany: Right. Yeah. It's a live stream.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: And someone came in and said, "Yeah, can I have faith without religion?" And I was like, "Yeah, faith is something that we hold individually, it is something that we curate and grow. And that's our spiritual practice, and we disciple and... But religion is, like, a lot of people doing that, and then seeing other people having the same experience with God; and saying, like, 'Oh, I've had that same experience, like, I feel like your God, and the way you interact with spirituality, is very similar to mine. So, let's get together, and let's talk about it. And let's create a community. And then it grows. And then you get traditions, and then you get rituals. And then you get, you know, these patterns.'" So, absolutely, you can have faith without ever walking into a church. I believe at some point, you're gonna want community. But I'm not gonna say, you know, that you can't ever have faith without a community.

Sara: Yeah. You walk that line in a very liberative way, the idea that you're able to speak realistically into a situation where, I mean, you refer to these as “theological deserts”. And that's part of why you exist in this community online, for folks who are in a space where they don't have community in their zip code that they can connect with.

Bethany: Correct. They don't have a pastor that's gonna support their faith walk.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: They don't have a community that they can walk into and says, “God loves you.”

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: That church is four or five hour drive away.

Sara: Yeah, like people in a food desert, which is a term people may be more familiar with...

Bethany: Yeah.

Sara: ... are living in a space where they're looking at, for healthy, fresh, nourishing groceries and they can't find them. It's packaged.

Bethany: Right.

Sara: It's not good for their bodies. It is designed for a long shelf life, but not to nurture a living being – the same term that you're using, “theological desert”: here are religious experiences that exist. But (laughs) are they good for us? Everyone?

Bethany: Yeah, their spiritualness. Yeah.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Bethany: Yeah, the spiritual side is just not being nourished. There's no, you know, access. And that's what really drove me to start looking for a partner for a new worshiping community, was these people need a pastor, I've met all these people, and I cannot leave them behind.

Sara: Hmm.

Bethany: Like, I can't go back to in-person church because these people really need me. And it was just pulling me into two different directions. And so I was like, “Okay, let's see if someone will partner with me, who will see the same need as I do, and see if we can get these people access...”

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: "...to a faith that's gonna actually help them grow."

Sara: And what's at the heart for you, of beginning that kind of relationship for the folks who you look back on in that moment and say, "I'm not gonna leave these people behind and turn off TikTok and go back to my day job in an office where worship occurs in one particular zip code?"

Bethany: Knowing that they had not walked away from God. They walked away from a church. I'm gonna get emotional. (laughs) They want a relationship with Jesus. It is something that they have felt loved by. They read the Bible and they go, "this is who I want to be. This is what I want to be like, I want to walk in this faith." But then they go to church, and they don't see that gospel being lived out in the way that they read it. And they're getting told they can't leave, because they're gay, or they have to change, or they can't change their pronouns, or their name. Like, all of these things, literally get people banned from churches.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: I have heard the most abysmal stories like PC(USA), we live in a nice little bubble. The things that other churches are doing are terrible. And to know that that's out there, that people are bumping up against that, that that message is loud and clear on every platform, I was like, "You know what? (laughs) I really like what PC(USA) does. I think they are really leading something here." And obviously, we have not been loud enough.

Sara: Hmm.

Bethany: And so, if I have to step on a few toes, if I have to deal with trolls, I'm gonna do it because there are so many people out there who are desperate to hear the gospel and be told that God loves them. And nobody is doing it.

Sara: Wow.

Bethany: Uh, it's amazing. (laughs)

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Bethany: Just the things that I hear, the trauma that people have gone through, the abuse that their church has said, "you have to do this in order to be a Christian." It's just like, where have we gone so wrong? So I'm hoping that I can win back a little bit of that reputation with my social presence, with the videos that I make. I'm hoping I can be present and create community, declutter some of the faith that they have gathered throughout their lives, so that they can have that relationship with God and Jesus, that they want to be a Jesus follower.

Sara: Wow.

Sara: I can imagine being exhausted by the numerous things that need to be unpacked, that you find yourself in these conversations of folks receiving what we would say are completely distorted understandings of God's love and the Gospel. And having been exposed to circles, where apologetics are taking really seriously this idea of like, "how do we make a case for our faith? How do we utilize certain scriptures to support one view or another?" And how ingrained and relentless some of those conversations – not even conversations, but some of those perspectives – have been for people in their lives. It's so easy to say, "well, it's just too difficult to untangle what it would require the force of response is too difficult to sustain for one person."

And yet, you've joined this mechanism that has a snowballing effect, where the community itself is engaging and sharing the videos and responses you're posting that I think are very carefully framed, thoughtfully, and lovingly responded to. And it's kind of an amazing scenario. Because it would be easy to be in our bubble and say, "Oh, we're at the church that..you know where we stand. And here's where we're gonna meet. And you can look at our *Book of Confessions* or see our words on the website." And you're like, "No, I'm going there."

Bethany: Yeah.

Sara: You are being sent to these people.

Bethany: I get a lot of that, like, Scripture quotes in my comment section, here they'll throw just a Scripture in there from people who are like, "Oh, well, obviously, you haven't read this bit." And that is really frustrating for me, because anything that's like proof texting and pulling like that, I can't come back to you within a four line comment. It's a conversation. It's exegesis, its study and scholars and theologians. So it frustrates me because I'm like, they think they've won...

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: ... because either I delete the comment, or I come back with something sassy and silly and don't actually reply to it. I have the word "Timothy" blocked on all of my social media platforms, because I have so many people giving me 1 Timothy, "Women can't be pastors."

Sara: Wow.

Bethany: When I didn't have it blocked, I was getting hundreds a day. And I'm like, "Do you really think?" (laughing)

Sara: And like, "Oh, I didn't know that. I'm so glad that you shared that with me."

Bethany: "Oh, I missed that part." (laughing) I made videos about it...

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: ...like, responding and I tried to, like, start sending people, like, Hey: I made a video about it." 'cause really, it does need like a 5-minute video to talk about where PC(USA) has brought their stance from 'cause it was a full thought. Like, we didn't just do this. We thought it out.

Sara: Ordaining women to the ministry?

Bethany: Yeah. This isn't something that we just did on a whim.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: And because of that, I can't just give you a Scripture to prove you wrong.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: That is the thing that frustrates me, and knowing that they're doing that on other people's pages and other people's comments.

Sara: Mm.

Bethany: So every once in a while, I'll make a video of, like, witty ways to respond-

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: ... these kinds of things. You know, just kind of funny, like, responses. And I've started now, like – I've been doing this for two and a half years. I've started now to see the people who are following me get into my comment section before I do, and give the response that I've kind of done a few times.

Sara: Wow.

Bethany: Or feeling confident enough to put themselves forward and join that conversation and say, "Hey, what about this?" Or "how about that?" You know, like, we talk a lot about asking questions. And so that was like a huge proud pastor moment for me to be like, "they're starting to be confident enough in what they believe, to defend it."

Sara: Wow. That's huge. And I think you're offering a somewhat less common understanding about how Scripture can be read, and the fact that it is interpreted by nature of it being read, that it's not this, highlight, paste and cut this Scripture and put it into somebody's comments. And "that's what that Scripture means." But you're taking the time to equip people with an understanding of the context in which scripture was written, and the context in which scripture is interpreted. And I think that's...

Bethany: Yes.

Sara: ... that's a worthy challenge, right? I mean, because...

Bethany: Yeah.

Sara: ... people have been educated by their pastors and Christian communities to see that as entirely scandalous.

Bethany: Yeah. And I've had a couple people who have reached out, who either joined a Bible study or got a pastoral care appointment, who have been really dissatisfied with what I give them. Because I don't have answers.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: And so I talked to them about like, "well, there are Christians who come at it from this angle. There are Christians who come at it from this angle, here's what this word means in Greek and Hebrew. What do you think?" And they're like, "No, I asked you what it meant." "I don't know. What does it mean?" (laughs)

Sara: (laughs)

Bethany: "I don't have an answer. I have a spectrum. I can tell you the history. I can tell you what I think, what I believe. I can tell you what PCUSA believes. But it's not necessarily the right and only way." And that really frustrates some people, because they're so used to having a catechism in front of them and saying, "here's the question, here..." That's how I was raised.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: I was raised Missouri Synod Lutheran.

Sara: Wow.

Bethany: "Here's the question, here's the answer. Here's the question, here's the answer. The whole book, here's the question, here's the answer." And so they want that. They want us to say like, oh, yeah, great. So what's the answer on the other side? Uh, sorry, I don't have that.

Sara: Mm. And when you don't have that, and you are in your own intentionality, your own consciousness, choosing not to provide that to people and saying, "I can't, in good conscience, just tell you what to believe," like it- it's more of a relationship than that. What is it, do you think in your heart as a pastor, that they have instead? If religion is not always about ask a question, know the answer, here's the question, this is the answer. What for you, is it about?

Bethany: So I relate it to when I went through Greek and Hebrew.

Sara: Uh-huh.

Bethany: I did Greek first. And I was gonna learn every single term in English and Greek, how they translate it, how... I was just like all gung-ho.

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: I wore myself out. So when I took Hebrew, I was like, "okay, learn to use the resources, learn how to find the word, how to look up what it means, how to piece these together, what those sorts of mechanisms are, that create the language, and that." I am much better at Hebrew now because I know how to find the answer, or find something that can get me closer to an answer.

Sara: Yeah,

Bethany: So for the people in Our Tapestry, they are building the muscles of reading Scripture, of asking questions of Scripture. I say all the time, "why was this story written? Who was this written to? And why was it told this way?" And so those three questions can really get us around a lot of the toxic and abusive theology of like, "women have to submit to men." Okay, why is that story being told?

Sara: Hmm.

Bethany: Who was that story being told to? And why was it being told that way? Why does it not say, men submit? Why does it say differently – like, words that differently – why is it different? And then we have a conversation, and then they go, "Okay, well, that makes sense that, you know, they're learning to trust their experience with God."

Sara: Hmm.

Bethany: So, we put a lot of emphasis on Scripture and tradition and these things that we can hold. We have backed away a bit from experience. And so for them to come to me and say, "I just can't believe that God would hate me." And I'm like, "Yeah, because your experience with God tells you that God does care for you."

Sara: Hmm.

Bethany: "That you have seen God working in your life, that God has not asked you to change. And so, you're seeing a difference in what is happening physically in your body as your experience in the Spirit, and what's being told to you." And so to empower and affirm and lift up the experiences that they've had with God, they're able to trust themselves a little bit more to

be like, "oh, yeah, I do have the Holy Spirit, I can read this thing. I'm smart enough to think this through."

Sara: Yeah.

Bethany: "And I come to community to talk about it. And I call up Rev. Bethany, when I'm like, I'm really stuck." You know, they're learning the resources, how to use those, so that they can really work through Scripture and God's word.

Sara: Yeah. I love that.