

WYF_Ep95_BestOf_SandraVanOpstal

Rasool Berry: [00:00:00] Hey y'all, it's Rasool Berry. Thanks for joining me on this special *Best of Where Ya From?* episode. We went back and selected some of our favorite conversations to share with you so that no matter when you started listening to *Where Ya From?*, you could check them out. Today, I wanted to share our episode with musician, author, and pastor Sandra Van Opstal.

In talking with Sandra, I learned she was an early fan of the podcast. And I was already a fan of hers too, so I was delighted she joined Season Four. And she did not disappoint. Sandra is passionate about caring for the most vulnerable, especially immigrants. Her own family's story of migration from Latin America offers a powerful context that takes us beyond politics and into proximity.

So thanks for listening and enjoy this best of where you're from with Sondra Van Opstal.

Sandra Van Opstal: When people ask me, like, how did you get to live a lifestyle of justice, I say because it's in the [00:01:00] Bible. Like it's literally the Bible study helped me get there. I did, I wasn't not an activist. I was not socially active. I did not grow up. I mean, I was living like Esther in a palace somewhere enjoying myself with the things, you know, and all the access.

And then all of a sudden I started reading Scripture. And I realized the very things I had learned growing up and the proximity that I had were the very things Jesus was speaking to in Scripture. And now that I know I'm responsible for that, I got to do something about it. And it happens to me all the time.

We've got, oh, you're so brave, you're so brave that you talk about immigration all the time. It's so brave of you. You have so much courage. I'm like, I'm not brave and I'm not courageous. I'm a pastor of an immigrant congregation. This is not a political issue. This is not a social issue. This is a pastoral concern that I have in my community. Families are being split up. People are dying. They don't have food. They're looking for a way out. We have to respond. And so I don't have a choice.[00:02:00]

Rasool Berry: This is *Where Ya From?*, an origin story podcast at the intersection of faith and culture that digs into the influences and experiences that shape who we are today. Join us as we gain insight into the Bible's wisdom for all, regardless of where we're from.

Hey y'all, this is Rasool Berry. Thanks for joining me on *Where Ya From?*. This week, I'm looking forward to sharing with you my real and raw conversation with Sandra Van Opstal. Sandra is a second-generation Latina, and the executive director of Chasing Justice. She's an author, pastor, and activist reimagining the intersection of faith and justice. You can find out more about Sandra by checking out the show notes, or by visiting wherelyafrom.org. That's where y-a from dot o-r-g. Please join me as I asked Sandra Van Opstal, where you're from?

Sandra Van Opstal: Chicago!

Rasool Berry: Aye! Chi-town, one of my favorite cities, by the way. Now where you born and raised in Chicago.

Sandra Van Opstal: I was, yes. And I was actually going to ask you when you say where you're from. I'm like, that question is very loaded, but let me tell you where I was born. I was born in Chicago.

Rasool Berry: Okay. And why would that question be loaded?

Sandra Van Opstal: Um, you know, a lot of times some of us get asked where we're from and what they really want to know is like, what is your heritage? You know? So when I hear that question, I'm like, hmm, which one do you want to know?

Rasool Berry: Yes. It's always so complex. That's kind of the nature of why we ask it in all of the ambiguities. So, you know, you mentioned heritage. So let's talk a little bit about that. Like, how do you describe that heritage?

Sandra Van Opstal: Every time I introduce myself, I tell them I'm the daughter of two immigrants. My mom is from Colombia and my father's from Argentina. And the reason I say that is because that has just deeply, deeply shaped who I am and how I understand the world and how I understand my faith. So my parents are both from South America. They came in their [00:04:00] twenties to Chicago, and they met learning English. So they met in an English class. And the rest is history.

Rasool Berry: What was the impetus for your mom and your dad to make that decision, from two different countries, to come to the U.S. ?

Sandra Van Opstal: There's always push pull factors. So there's the push factors of what was happening in their economies and in their government and their socio-political reality in mid to late 60s in Argentina and Colombia, and

there's layers to that, you know. Which I think still is the impetus for people migrating from other places. It's like, it's not only that I want something that's in the other space, It's that I can't be in this space for some reason.

So we encountered that all the time with our neighbors and our congregants who are coming from Honduras or Venezuela or wherever, Haiti. Um, and so there's a push factor. And then there's the pull factor, which I believe is the American Dream. Like in America, everything's better, you know, everything, [00:05:00] everything's possible in America, in the U.S. And so I think that was definitely there for them.

Rasool Berry: And so for your dad, why Chicago in particular?

Sandra Van Opstal: Oh, it's always about a friend. You know, he had a friend who had a job here. So he moved here to work for, you know, I don't know, making car radios when car radios were first being made. Like it was way back when, you know.

Rasool Berry: Got it.

Sandra Van Opstal: And I think they also came because during that time, the immigration laws had just changed. Um, there was immigration reform in 1965. They came when that window opened.

Rasool Berry: Wow. So, you know, you mentioned that those components of your parents background has shaped you significantly. Tell us a little bit how.

Sandra Van Opstal: Yeah, so my mom, she grew up in urban Colombia in Bogotá in the capital city. And she grew up in a large family, and they were very committed to being connected to a local church. So they were involved in their local Catholic parish. So coming to the U.S., her family was actually the one that lived in Chicago. And so I [00:06:00] was very, very connected to my mom's family. And the whole experience of kind of the very small Columbian enclave in Chicago and where we lived was kind of where they all lived.

And then being connected to Columbian kind of dancing, and cultural groups, and congregating at a local Roman Catholic parish in Spanish with my mother and my grandmother. And I mean, that's just the beginning of my faith story. And then my dad came from rural Argentina, like he was basically grew up on a farm. And he wanted to do something different in life.

So he moved to Buenos Aires, and through Buenos Aires he ended up in Chicago. And he grew up probably in a pretty disconnected religious experience

because Argentina was already moving kind of post church, post God in the era that he was growing up in. So he, I would say he reconnected to his faith when he was here in the States.

So both of those things have deeply shaped me. My mom's country is, [00:07:00] you know, completely different culturally than my dad's. And so, if you know anything about Colombians, they're like super warm, very fun, you know, a lot of very colorful and they don't like to fight. They like kind indirectly move to another subject so they don't have to argue at any point in time. Whereas Argentines, the only time they're not arguing is when they're talking about how great they are.

So, um, we just, my dad's side of the family loves to argue, and it's a part of connecting. So that's two very different spaces, and all has very deeply shaped who I am I think.

Rasool Berry: That's fascinating. It sounds like your home was in a lot of ways, this dynamic cultural experiment between, you know, a culture that's very warm and wanting to be more relational, with your dad's culture in Argentina that's like more invites this sense of intimacy through debate. And then on top of all that, they're in Chicago and you're trying to figure out like, that seems like a lot going on.

Sandra Van Opstal: Yeah. And actually because we had moved from the city to the suburbs when I was in grade [00:08:00] school, I think a lot of my experience was shaped by having to live within a different culture when I exited my home.

So when I left my home, I was speaking a different language. We didn't have means, and we were growing up in an incredibly wealthy suburb of Chicago. So it was a socioeconomic disconnect. It was a language disconnect. It was a cultural disconnect. And at the time, Columbia, this would have been in the eighties at the time, like every time we turned on like a movie or the news, it was like all about Colombian drug lords.

And so my mom had taught me like really, really, really young, she had taught me like, oh, you know, something that, you know, you don't have to tell them that you're from Colombia. You know, you can just fit in. You don't have to tell them, because I could pass racially for, you know, being white. So I think it was her way of trying to protect me from what I would encounter, the bias and the stereotypes that I would encounter. Or like, at least tell them you're from [00:09:00] Argentina, because then that's more favorable in this context.

So that shaped me. I mean, that's something I was still processing a therapy in my thirties. You know, like, what did it mean that my parents felt they had to you. give me that advice in order for me to survive within my school setting at like seven, eight years old.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. And that is pretty heavy. What did you do with that advice?

Sandra Van Opstal: I mean, I learned to talk how other people talked, and walk how other people walked, and hide the things that were unacceptable in those spaces, you know? Um, and I think that only escalated as I got older and more upwardly mobile, you know, as I got college educated and then as I was in different spaces, and as I moved from being in a Catholic tradition to being in a evangelical tradition.

Then there were lots of parts of me that I couldn't bring into those spaces and ways I had to adjust in those spaces. And so I think I got really good at reading, reading culture, reading difference, reading power, knowing what the norm was. [00:10:00] Like you go into a space and you see and you know, and then you adapt. And you assimilate.

Rasool Berry: It's fascinating in terms of the other aspects of your family, where you're only child or what are other siblings?

Sandra Van Opstal: Oh, no, yeah, there's four of us. So my sister is the oldest one. And then there's me. And then I have twin brothers.

Oh, yeah, all four of us grew up in a bicultural, bilingual experience. And all four of us actually work in bilingual context. So one of my brothers is an ER doctor, and he worked for a long time at one of the largest trauma hospitals in the country, but it's in Chicago. And so part of his early years of medicine, he was realizing how important it was to be bilingual and bicultural, to be able to understand populations that are typically underserved.

My other brother was a youth worker with at risk youth working on intervention and prevention through arts. And he continues to do work [00:11:00] in lots of different kind of social services and art and creative aspects of trying to change the narrative on who we are as a community, also bilingual in an official capacity.

And then my sister is actually an ELL teacher. And so she works with kids like her.

Rasool Berry: Wow.

Sandra Van Opstal: She was in the third grade when she moved to the suburb. She didn't have a word of English in her vocabulary. And so she helps children that are going through that transition who are also adopting and adapting to different social realities. Who are probably trying to heal from some trauma, all those kinds of things.

So, yeah, so all of us work in bicultural, bilingual spaces. And I think that was highly impacted by our experiences as children and the things we saw at home and the way that our social reality brought us into proximity with certain things.

Rasool Berry: Yeah, I mean, four for four, that's a big statement of the importance of that work. If we [00:12:00] had you all in a room together, right? Like, what are the shared things that y'all look upon and go, yeah, this is part of what it meant to come out of our household?

Sandra Van Opstal: Wow. Well, actually, we had very different experiences, but I'll tell you some shared things first. Um, the shared things are an understanding that even if you work hard, life might not be fair to you. So, the narrative is like work hard and you'll achieve whatever you want. Um, I think our shared narrative is like, even if you work hard life might still be unjust. And so you still have to work hard, but you also have to ask questions about the systems that you're a part of.

I think all of us share that. We are all involved in some kind of reflection of, or speaking to power in the systems that we're a part of. And I think that's a shared thing. And then the other thing that comes from that is having an eye for people who are othered or on the margins. I think all of us carry that.

So in our personal [00:13:00] lives, we all participate in what I would call a lifestyle of compassion and justice in our own local, private, nobody needs to hear about it settings of the way that we neighbor and live. And I think that's consistent for all of us, in very different ways, but for all of us.

Rasool Berry: You've used the term "other" and talking about how people can be othered. Share with us what you mean by that.

Sandra Van Opstal: When I say othered, I'm talking about that idea of what is kind of at the center or normal, um, and people that are outside of the norm. So I think if someone speaks a different language, but it's an English dominant space, then it's. . .you could be othered. If someone is Pentecostal in a reformed space, you could be kind of othered or marginalized.

So I would use it in intermixed, or in replacement with marginalized or underrepresented. But it has a sense of like, it's not just that you're different, but you're different,

Rasool Berry: Yeah, and it sounds like that was [00:14:00] something that was an open conversation that was even a family discussion as you process family members, friends who are also trying to make this, you know, very significant transition.

I just want to double click on the church component because you talked about the importance of church in general, especially with the congregation that your mom had been connected to. And then at some point a shift happened in terms of how you personally express faith. So when do you recall your faith and walk with Jesus becoming an important part of your life?

Sandra Van Opstal: I think my faith has always been an important part of my life. I understood faith to be communal when I was attending a Catholic parish in Spanish. I think I understood it to be a communal expression. Like I belong to this family, therefore I am this thing. Like I am a Christian because I belong to this community, and people like us think like [00:15:00] this, and people like us do things like this.

So it was a collective identity. I believe it was authentic. I believe it was central to who I was and how I understood the world. And we always prayed. And, you know, my grandmother lived with us and she was always praying, you know. And she was always reading Scripture and she was always reminding us of God's presence and whatever we were going through.

And when I was 13, my father ended up working kind of some side jobs, because our family needed it, and he started working alongside these three painters. They were brothers. And what he didn't know is that those three brothers were Baptist ministers. So they were all pastors of Southern Baptist churches.

So he started painting with them and they had like on the radio, like Christian radio. So imagine sermons and music. And so he started listening to those things. And he had never really attended church with us a lot growing up, maybe like Easter or Christmas. He didn't really like the form of church or the experience of it. Through [00:16:00] this painting houses with these brothers, he came to faith through that experience. And so he dragged us to another church, which was very traumatic for our family because in Latino cultures to switch church between like a Catholic and a Protestant and Pentecostal, it's like a very strong lines between those traditions within Latin America.

And so, you know, we're like, what is this place we're coming to? Like, what are these songs we're singing? What are we doing? But, um, eventually, like they invited me and asked me, like, do you believe Jesus died for your sins? And do you believe that Jesus wants to have a relationship with you? And I was like, yes, I do believe that.

So I would say that I proclaimed faith through my Southern Baptist experience. And then I was rebaptized in adult believer baptism as a teenager. And then that began this total journey into all these different Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical expressions of faith that kind of opened up a door to another world for me.

And then I would say that in [00:17:00] college, I was discipled. And that was through the ministry of InterVarsity. And they helped to teach me that I could read Scripture, that I could understand God's Word, that God's word had something to say to me about the things I lived on a daily, that there was not like a manual for life, but a way of understanding the world in God's word. And I fell in love with Scripture and I was discipled in college.

Rasool Berry: Gotcha. I do want to circle back real quick about your grandma. I remember watching *In The Heights* and there's a song there, "Paciencia Y Fe." I'm not, I don't speak Spanish, so that's the best I could do. I'm sorry. But it was so amazing to me, um, seeing this kind of story of this abuela, the grandmother and the, and her journey.

And of course, I think, um, in *Encanto*, you also see that vibe. And it reminded me of, you know, Big Mama in the African American context. So, you know, uh, even my own grandmom and [00:18:00] the role that she played. Tell me a little bit more about the role that your grandmother played and some of the things that you learned and picked up from her.

Sandra Van Opstal: So in the Latino theology discussion right now, a lot of the way that we talk about our understanding of faith is through abuela theology and abuelita theology. We understand ourselves in relationship to our grandmother, to our abuela. Wery much so like the, the auntie in the black church, like the mothers of the church, all that, all the thing, you know, all the things in the black church that we very much in affinity to.

Like the role of the wise woman who has gone through some things in life, who's the only one who has the right to tell you what you should be doing because she has been through some things. So I think that whether it's the abuela in *Encanto*, whether it's *In The Heights*, you know, it's this experience of like, well, my grandmother knows she's been through some stuff. And if everything she's been through [00:19:00] doesn't negate her deep, deep love for

God, or God's presence, then I can also hang on while I'm trying to figure this thing out.

So I think it is an anchor in our communities of like, when it feels like God is not present, but the grandmothers of the church are the ones who pray on Saturdays, and the ones who come alongside of you. And I have this woman at a friend at church. She's an abuela, and when I come in on Sundays, sometimes, like, I'm so tired from ministry. I'm so tired from all the things that I have to do outside of particularly my neighborhood space, when I'm like trying to speak words of transformation, or reform and other places that don't want to hear it, and I'm just so tired. And a lot of times I'll come to church, and if she's in the front of the church, like when I come in, it's like over. Because if I get her arms wrapped around me, I'm just like a puddle of tears before I even walk in.

And it's because she's wise. She's been through [00:20:00] so much. And even in the injustice, and the pain, and the longing that she must carry for how the world could be, she loves God so much. And she believes God. So I think for me, I'm like, well, I want to have that.

I want to have that type of faith that is described in the scriptures. Like oaks of righteousness with their roots so deeply rooted, and so grounded, that people around you, they know that you mean business. That your praise to God isn't an escapism from what is real in life. It's deeply rooted in your experience of what has happened in life. So I think the grandmother in the Latina tradition is that spiritual center.

Rasool Berry: Wow. Well, thank you for sharing that. Um, and it's, it's a beautiful thing to witness and experience. Um, [00:21:00] and you know, when do you start getting this yearning for knowing more in the Bible? Was that when you got to college or was that before?

Sandra Van Opstal: I mean, I've always been a curious person. But my curiosity about scripture started when somebody gave me permission.

Rasool Berry: Hmm. Yeah, break that down.

Sandra Van Opstal: I was heading out to like do something, I don't know, work out or something in college. And I saw this group of people sitting in my dorm common space. And they were reading the Bible and I was like, "Oh, what are you guys doing?"

And that was the end of it for me. They're like, "Oh, we're actually studying the Bible. Do you want to join us?" And of course, I felt like I had to then because

that was a holy thing to do. So I stopped and I was like, Okay. Forget my workout. And then so I stayed and I was like, “Oh, you can understand this thing.”

Like somebody doesn't have to be preaching at you or teaching you. It's not so mysterious that you, you can't read it yourself. And I had known that in some way because my mother always had those like little devotionals in the like front [00:22:00] room and in the living room and baskets everywhere. There's little devotionals of all kinds of people would give to her.

So she read like little snippets here and there. But my father had this old, like, you know, that white Bible with the big Jesus on the front of it. You know, that one with the gold leaf? He had that one that he bought at a garage sale for 25 cents. And I always saw him reading that. And it's got like highlighter and it's got circling in it.

So I think that influenced me. Like studying Scripture as a part of what we do as people. Me seeing him there studying Scripture all the time influenced me. I just had never tried to pick up the Bible and read it, really, until students who are my peers, who are just like me, who are not professionals, who are not experts, said, do you want to come and read Scripture with us?

Rasool Berry: Wow. That's the same thing that happened with me. And I remember one of the particular verses that I first read that was so, like, just rung true to me was, uh, Matthew 5:6, [00:23:00] “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.” And I felt like that was like this promise that I experienced. And then on a deeper level years later to understand that that word righteousness could be also interpreted justice even deepened that sense for me.

I'm curious for you, like what was like one of the first verses or scriptures that really stood out to you that was really significant when you started to read the Bible on your own?

Sandra Van Opstal: For me the most significant thing in Scripture was the testimony of Jesus. And so, I can't think of a particular like red letter, you know. Like what I believe is the book of Luke for me showed me a God who came to be close. And to not just feel what we feel and know, we know in human form in the flesh, but also who deeply cared about the world that He was living in. Who touched people who were sick and [00:24:00] socially on the margins, who spoke to women who others did not speak to or saw as property, who reached out to and created space for people that had been discarded or had been, ignored, or had been vulnerable.

And so what I saw was a God who cared. I connected for the first time, the deep understanding that God is present with us, and that God is going to do something about the world that we live in. Like those two pieces that God wasn't just for me. And it's just not about me and Jesus, even though all the songs are written like that. It's not just about me and God. Actually, God deeply cares about the world, and God died to save the world.

Rasool Berry: That is so rich. I think about Luke 4:18, right? You know, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the captive, and the year of the Lord's favor” as this [00:25:00] like, wow, that's Jesus's announcement to say I'm not just here to try to give you fire insurance when you die, but I'm here to bring about a new kingdom.

Sandra Van Opstal: I was gonna say also that in that passage in Luke 4, one of the things that comes out is, you know, we think about our faith being you know, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim good news. And then there's these things that we're going to do, you know, we're going to proclaim good news, we're going to give sight to the blind.

But in actuality, in that verse in the Greek, the way that the sentence structure is, the main thing that we're going to do is to proclaim good news. And the way in which the, the ones that are subordinate to that are, to set the oppressed free, to give sight to the blind, et cetera, et cetera.

And so it's not that we're doing four different things in that passage. It's that actually what we're doing is the proclamation of the good news, and the way in which we proclaim the good news is the demonstration of that good news.

Rasool Berry: Come on, you better teach.

Sandra Van Opstal: I [00:26:00] wasn't not an activist. I was not socially active. I did not grow. I mean, I was living like Esther in a palace somewhere, enjoying myself with the things, you know, and all the access. And then all of a sudden, I started reading Scripture and I realized the very things I had learned growing up and the proximity that I had, were the very things Jesus was speaking to in Scripture. And now that I know, I'm responsible for that. I got to do something about it.

And it happens to me all the time. Oh, you're so brave. You're so brave that you talk about immigration all the time. It's so brave of you. You have so much courage. I'm like, I'm not brave and I'm not courageous. I'm a pastor of an

immigrant congregation. This is not a political issue. This is not a social issue. This is a pastoral concern that I have in my community.

Families are being split up. People are dying. They don't have food. They're looking for a way out. We have to respond. And so I don't have a choice. It's not like I wake up in the morning and I go, do I want to care about mass incarceration, or do I not want to care about mass [00:27:00] incarceration?

Should that be an issue I should care about? Uh, criminal justice system and the mass incarceration system impacts our congregation and my neighbors on a daily basis. So therefore, I don't get to choose whether I speak to that injustice, I just have proximity to it. And because of my understanding of Jesus, and the ethic of Scripture, Genesis to Revelation, I have to respond.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. No, that's one of the things that you wrote. *“Proximity to pain makes it not merely political, but personal.”* Could you give us an example of how that shift has occurred, or distance versus proximity, making something that might be considered political for you that's been very personal.

Sandra Van Opstal: Yeah. I mean, education. Cause I already talked about immigration, mass incarceration, so let's talk about education.

Um, It's so great that people have tutoring programs after school. That's so amazing. I'm so glad that people have them. And we need more, we need more of those [00:28:00] tutoring programs. But the problem is actually our public school system, and how funding gets allocated to our public schools. And I have neighbors who are part of the Chicago public school system and my kids are in the Chicago public schools.

And so I don't have a decision about whether or not I want to advocate for good education, healthy lunches, access to mental health within our public schools. This is impacting my children, it's impacting my neighbor's children, it's impacting all the kids that go to my church because they're enrolled primarily in public schools.

So if I wasn't a parent who had kids in the public school system. If I wasn't in proximity to just in my own building, cause I live in a building with other people, teenagers, Latino and black teenagers that are in our public school systems, if I didn't pastor in a congregation that was impacted by that, and I didn't see it see their reading levels, and I didn't see what they were encountering, and I didn't see the kind of trauma that they were dealing with, then I might [00:29:00] say like, well, you know, they just don't work hard enough. Or I don't even know. Like the other day there was a teacher sitting in

our small group talking about what's happening in her school, and I was like, well, what's the answer then?

And she was like, I don't know. And we both just sat there like, we need some wisdom. We need some creativity. We need some, because it, it's terrible. And so I think those are the things, education, immigration, criminal justice. I mean, waste management, pick a topic, streets and sanitation. Like if you're in proximity to communities that are typically disenfranchised, then you're going to see that certain streets get plowed before others do.

Rasool Berry: Yeah.

Sandra Van Opstal: Certain communities have access to services that other zip codes don't have access to, even though you're all in the same city.

Rasool Berry: When we come back, Sandra will tell us about a time she spoke from her heart, and it caused a surprising backlash which made her step away from her ministry. That's coming next on *Where You're From?*[00:30:00]

Hey, what's up y'all? It's Rasool Barry, and I'm here with a very special person to introduce a new project that we're doing. Dr. Christin Thorpe. How you doing?

Christin Thorpe: I'm good. Happy to be here.

Rasool Berry: Cool, cool. Tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do here, uh, at our Daily Bread Ministries.

Christin Thorpe: All right. Hey everyone. My name's Christin Thorpe, and I am the director of the Thriving Black Church Initiative for Our Daily Bread Ministries. And the Thriving Black Church Initiative is an initiative funded through the Lilly Endowment to support Black churches in thriving post covid.

The church is not the same tat it was 10 years ago, or even 20 years ago when I was growing up. So we are excited to come together and to provide resources to help it to continue to thrive, research to make sure that our voices are being heard, and we're excited to see what's next and to develop products to help the church thrive.

Rasool Berry: And one of those products or resources is what we're gonna talk to you about. You know, we've been teasing this. If you've been listening to the, *Where Ya From?* podcast over the last few months, that there was something new coming, something different. Well, here it is.

It's a multimedia project, uh, that is going to be brought to us by the Thriving Black Church Initiative to really explore and examine the journeys, the stories, and the needs of African American Christians who are Gen Z, millennials and those who are just trying to make sense of faith in a world in where so much has changed with technology, with the way that we work, live, and play. A

nd so we get an opportunity to do that together as co-hosts. I'm so excited about that. And you can stay tuned for more. That's going to be coming real soon. Christin, how can they find out more?

Christin Thorpe: Follow us at Experience Voices on Instagram. It will be your go-to spot for Bible engagement resources now, and to stay up to date with everything we're creating for you in the future. So follow us.

Rasool Berry: Yes, I'm so glad to be a co-host with you in this new project. So, keep it locked here. Stay tuned, and we'll see y'all soon.

Christin Thorpe: See you soon.

Rasool Berry: Now, let's get back into our conversation with Sandra Van Opstal on *Where You're From?*.

I do want to kind of circle back into like your experience in college, right? Like, you know, you mentioned kind of walking up on that Bible study. But on the one end, I can imagine how this enthusiasm and excitement about learning this method and approach to inductive Bible study and all of that was very invigorating.

But on another end, I imagine it was a much different way of expressing faith and spirituality than what you grew up with with your abuela. So like, tell me a little bit about how those things kind of, you know, came together for you in college, and how you maybe even had to navigate some of the challenges of what it meant to show up as yourself in your unique way in a space that maybe wasn't built for you.

Sandra Van Opstal: The first thing that comes to mind is expressiveness and emotion, and the role of [00:31:00] emotion and expression in, not only worship, but in like prayer and the way that you talk about faith. So, I remember like thinking, oh, when people pray, they pray like super quietly. Like, God, we just thank you for this great day. And Father God, we just, we ask that you would be like, it was just like, I didn't understand it.

So it was like, you got quieter and softer and slower when you prayed. So like, oh, this is how you pray. But that's not how I would talk or pray to God. Um, so there was like an acceptable way of praying, like an acceptable way of being.

When I was in seminary, I would cry all the time during lectures. Wm, and this is what happened in Bible study too in college, like I would cry when I would be moved by what I would read about God or Jesus. Like people would kind of look at me like what's happening with her. She must have some like serious sin that she's like responding to the passage this way.

And I'm like, no, I'm just actually moved by the beauty of God's goodness. Um, I'm not falling apart. I don't have some deep sin I didn't tell you about. This is not the first time I'm hearing this passage. [00:32:00] Like I'm merely just moved by God. And this is what happens in my body when I'm moved by God.

I cry. You know, I weep. I remember like, sometimes when I hear someone preach like at church or in like a, uh, lecture, or in undergrad or in grad school, like I would want to, I just want to want to shoot my hands up like, yeah, like, amen them, throw a shoe at them, whatever, like respond in some way. And it was like, oh no, I have to contain myself. I must contain myself in this space because worship is containment.

And so I think those kinds of messages, I was kind of wrestling with. Like my way of expressing myself is offensive to you. My politic, like my understanding of the world and what we should do for the world, is offensive to you. I don't know what to do with myself then.

So I think in college, I did a lot of assimilating. And then in grad school, I did a lot of coming back to myself.

Rasool Berry: [00:33:00] Wow. That sounds like a, a lot to process. Thanks for sharing that story. I mean, it's painful in its familiarity, but it's also, I think, inspiring in the way that you clearly were able to, you know, push through it. How did you? Like, what was it that changed from undergrad to college that got you to, you know, maybe deconstruct some of the ways that you had assumed faith construction or formation was supposed to look like?

Sandra Van Opstal: Scripture changed me. So I was at a conference, and I heard a woman who was the director of the Chicago Urban Program at the time, uh, Reverend Dr. Brenda Salter McNeill speak through Esther. And she preached that Scripture in its cultural context. This was maybe early 2000s. And I so identified with Esther.

Like I had been made to change my name. I had been made to change the way that I dressed. I had been made to go [00:34:00] into another place to be, particularly as I went into college, like, uh, distant from my community and my setting.

And I was like in another world, and I was in this palace and I was experiencing these things but I was still under an oppressive system. And Esther was not a winner of a beauty pageant. She was trafficked. That's what happened to Esther. She was not excited that she was taken into the king's home. This was survival. And that biblical preaching that came then out of Daniel, it came out of Esther, it came out of most of the lives of the prophets.

And then I was like, oh, Jesus, Jesus also had this experience. Jesus was also an in between. Moses was a tricultural man. He had three cultures, the culture he was born into, the culture that raised him, and the wilderness. And all of those three things impacted him deeply.

And who else would God call to free God's people if not the person that was born from the people, raised in power, and understood the setting of the wilderness they [00:35:00] were going to? Who else was going to do that? And so I was like, wow, the Scripture speaks to people like me. And I don't have to be someone else.

I can actually be as brown as I am. Like I can be as Latina as I am. I can be as expressive as I am. I can be as concerned for social change as I am. And that's all a part of Scripture. So I would say at every point in time of my formation, it has always been understanding the Bible in its context that has liberated me to a deeper and deeper relationship with God. And my love for what I'm doing right now, my understanding of what it means to truly preach God's word, all those things are being formed in Scripture. And every step of the way it has been that way.

Rasool Berry: Wow. I get excited just hearing about that roll call you just gave, but I want to circle in on one of those folks in particular, on Moses. [00:36:00] In your writing, you've referenced a Moses moment that you had before that, uh, I wanted to ask you about. Because that's the other side of this. It can sometimes be heavy to kind of have to navigate all that.

Sandra Van Opstal: So I have always been a fósforoito, as I told you, I've always been a little match. So, um, in the early 2000s, when everybody thought we were very post racial and everything was all equitable, and we were having our, you know, lovely unity moment, I was not experiencing that at all as a woman of color in predominantly white institutions.

And I was trying to speak up for what I saw as financial inequity, as kind of leadership disparity in different spaces. And nobody would listen to me. You know, it was like, the people who experienced my experience, they listened to me, but the people who were in power would not listen to me.

And so the more I did that, just the [00:37:00] angrier and angrier I got. And I acted out of my anger, and so I said some things. And I said them publicly like, not like an open letter or Instagram because that didn't really exist, but like I said them in the world. I said the things into the world, you know, and I got in trouble. And I took a leave of absence because I had to figure out what the dissonance was between what I was trying to do and what was, you know, the actual results.

So I worked with my spiritual director on it. And we talked through like this moment that Moses had where, you know, Moses had an awakening. He had this awakening that the people from his community were being oppressed, and were enslaved. Their humanity and their dignity was being taken from them. And when he had that awakening moment, he moved from his gut. Like he just from his gut, ee was like, nooo. You can see, like, everything was like, this is not going to happen. And he lashed out. [00:38:00] And so he acted on an injustice in a way that I don't think honored God, and or was the best way to do it. You know, so he got himself in trouble, you know. He murdered someone and then he had to go off and be in the wilderness by himself.

And I feel like, I mean, I did not murder anyone just so you guys know. But sometimes words can have force, you know. And I remember having a mentor sit down with me and say, like, everything you're saying is right, Sandra. You are right. Like, you are justified. You can sue all these people and all these organ. . . you could do all that.

You could take them to court. You could file a grievance. You could do all those things, but that's not going to change what Jesus wants to do in you. So first, let's work on what Jesus wants to do in you. And they suggested that I take a leave of absence. So I took a timeout, and in that timeout, I was able to sort through what was actually true about what was being said about me.

Because what I found out was what I was reacting to was not only the injustice that was happening, but that people were [00:39:00] putting labels on me that weren't true. She's a heretic. She hates white people. She's a Marxist. She's whatever she is. And I was like, I'm not any of those things. I'm just trying to invite you guys to like, be just, like don't pretend you're doing something and then you're practicing injustice.

So it was a huge leadership mistake. So I almost left ministry. I almost left the organizations. But I really leaned into some of my mentors who told me, you know, what you're identifying and assessing is right. And your instinct to fight back is human. But unless work that you're doing is rooted in the Spirit and in your faith, it will never be fruitful.

So, you could leave these places, but this pattern is going to follow you everywhere you go. So I was being given those words of life from different mentors who told me all of them from different [00:40:00] cultures. You need to sit down because this is not prophetic. This is just straight up prickly.

Rasool Berry: Wow.

Sandra Van Opstal: You're just tired, and you're functioning out of anger. And so I did it.

Rasool Berry: How hard was that for you to do?

Sandra Van Opstal: It was hard, but it was, it was a freeing invitation at the same time. Because these people knew me and they loved me. So they said, Sandra, we know those things are not true. We know you love Scripture. We know you love God. We know you're committed to biblical truth.

We know that about you. We know that you love everyone, but we also know that you don't like when power is being abused. And you don't like when certain communities are given that in certain communities are stripped of their power or marginalized. We know that about you. We know what you wanted to do. We know who you want to be. This route is not going to take you there.

Rasool Berry: The reason why I asked about the difficulty because I, knowing, you know, how you described your personality and that little [00:41:00] match, and that strong sense of justice that you had, I can imagine it took a lot of . . . a lot of things, you know. Faith, humility, courage.

But it also reminds me of James, um, in verse 19 of, uh, I think it's the first chapter where he says, *“Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear slow to speak slow to anger. For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”*

And it seemed like in that moment, you know, through your spiritual mentors and directors and support, they were able to help you see there is a righteousness of God that's being violated, but this approach isn't going to bear

that type of fruit that you want to see. But that's still a hard thing to hear and embrace.

Sandra Van Opstal: It is. Particularly if you're a person that is underrepresented and often judged in a space. I think that's where it's hard.

Rasool Berry: Right. So it's almost like [00:42:00] it's harder to hear the kernel of truth that might be in a statement that is drenched in a historic way that people that look like you to kind of silence them or to ignore what they have to say.

Sandra Van Opstal: It's not only a different expression in the room, it is an expression that carries with it a lot of power. And when people are not used to seeing people like you in power, they can often misunderstand. My experience is that I'm often misunderstood.

Rasool Berry: Yeah.

Sandra Van Opstal: That experience of being misunderstood and knowing that it's not just personality, and it's not just spiritual leadership, but it's also cultural norms and expectations, and racialized biases, that you're trying to sort through, like, am I really the problem or is this institution the issue?

And my friends invited me to ask, you can't control the [00:43:00] institution. You can't invite them into a deeper place of cultural intelligence and equity. You can't do that because you're the one that's in the fight with them right now.

So the only thing you can ask is “Jesus, what is the invitation for me?” So I began to do that. I began to name the elements. I feel misunderstood. I feel rejected. I feel minimized. I feel silenced by the system. And yet, Jesus, I'm asking you what is the invitation for me? Because I also want to repent. I also want to ask for forgiveness. I also want to be free. So what is the invitation for me? And the invitation was timeout.

Rasool Berry: That's such an insightful and humbling lesson. And thank you. Again, for just your realness, because yeah, it's so layered, right? The experience of [00:44:00] navigating through asking that question when you are also needing to advocate for yourself and for others in that same dynamic. Um, so at what point did you realize what the next step was going to be? And what was that next step after you finished up in grad school?

Sandra Van Opstal: I didn't know what the next step was going to be. Um, I was attending Urbana, and Reverend Brenda Salter McNeill, who at that time

then was my mentor, she spoke from the stage about an experience she had as a leader and the sacrifice that God was calling her into.

And as we process that sermon, my husband said to me, I think it's time for you to go to grad school. Because I foresee the Lord elevating your leadership and I want you to be [00:45:00] prepared. Like for you to know and feel like you have all the tools you need to do the work that you're doing.

Um, this was like. I don't know, 12, 13 years into ministry. And so it was a series of conversations like that where I thought, okay, well, the community around me is saying more school is important. I'm just a learner. I love learning. So I'm going to read whether I'm in school or not. And so I went when I was in class with people who were significantly younger than me and had much less experience than I did.

And I was the only woman, and I was the only Latino in most of my classes. But they were right. Because I sat in class as a professor was warning against this social justice movement that was happening. This was late, like 2008, imagine. These people that are coming to talk about twisting the scriptures to talk about social justice.

And I love the professor and this particular area of expertise, like I really enjoyed it even though I didn't always agree. And I [00:46:00] listened to the warnings and I asked God, what is the fear here? What is the fear? And then as I was designing the curriculum for the Chicago Urban Program, which was specifically about community development and social engagement in the Gospel, I paid attention to the triggers that I was hearing in class.

What did they think I was saying? What did they think I was doing with Scripture? And then I built a curriculum that was unapologetically biblical, and prophetic. And I developed it because I was hearing the warnings and I'm turning my gaze to the global church to ask, well, how do you do it in South Africa? How do you do it in Indonesia?

How do you do it in India with so many people groups? How do you do it in Latin America, with the black and white dynamics that you have there? You know, like, what can we learn from these brothers and sisters around the world?

Rasool Berry: Ooh, that's good. I love that. So what did you decide to do next after seminary?

Sandra Van Opstal: [00:47:00] Yeah. So then after I did all this learning and the Greek and the Hebrew and the history and all that stuff, I went and I became

a pastor of a church on the west side of Chicago. That was very different than the socioeconomic space I had been in before that, uh, was very suspect of education, and more Pentecostal in its tradition, even though it's a reformed church, it was Reformacostal.

Um, and I was coming from a very intellectual, cerebral, evangelical, white evangelical space. So, um, that was another adjustment. So after I finished seminary, I went and I became an executive pastor and then a preaching pastor at a church that I still congregate at. And I had to learn how to take what I had learned within my context with university students, and in my context as a church planter, cause I was part of church planting teams, um, in both diverse ethnically and racially diverse settings, but [00:48:00] socioeconomically all upper middle class educated. And then I had to ask the question, how do I preach, teach Scripture and invite people into study Scripture in a way that is hospitable and thoughtful in this context?

When you're leading a Bible study and you're told before you start that week that there are two people in your Bible study that, that don't read. And that there's one person whose primary language is Spanish and not English. So now you're going to try to have a conversation, and you have to make sure that you're not speaking above or over people, or down to people, but with people are different than you.

Rasool Berry: Wow. That is, uh, another layer of complexity. You wrote in *The Next Worship*, “My passion is to share how people have been creating space in places of worship, which conserves models that will inspire us to future thinking.” Is that where some of your, your passion for creating these spaces of multi ethnic worship came from is your even your own context of having to figure that out?

Sandra Van Opstal: Yeah. I mean, it came primarily from, I was a musician. So I, you know, I'm a creative in that sense. Like I, I think I always ask the question, why are we doing what we're doing? Like I was that kid. And then the next question is, does it have to be this way? Can we imagine a new way forward?

So I am not one for deconstructing and tearing things down, and just leaving like, a demolished building there. My commitment is to build something in that space. Because living on the west side of Chicago, I know that if someone comes and demolishes a building, or empties a building and doesn't put anything in its place, that invites danger.

So for me, I think it's this like kind of creative part of me that's like, Oh, why don't we do it that way? Who, who said that that's the way to do it? Well, how

[00:50:00] could we do it differently? How would you do it? How would you do it? And then invite a community to build something together.

So I think I'm living in the what if world, and not so much the focus on just taking things apart. I'm just asking what if we did something else?

Rasool Berry: Yeah. And you're asking it in some very relevant context. I love that in *The Next Worship*, you kind of take us through the history of what that has looked like at InterVarsity, at the Urbana conference over the years. Um, like what are some of the things that you've learned about worship and why, because it's like we just started there was so much conversation about justice, right? And then I was like, wow, she's passionate about worship and justice.

Are they related in somehow in your mind and what are the things that you've learned about the importance of worship, and the next worship that you're talking about.

Sandra Van Opstal: Yes, worship and justice are related.

Rasool Berry: Let's start there

Sandra Van Opstal: Worship and justice are related. And they're related like [00:51:00] this Micah 6:8 says, *"He has told you what is good and what does the LORD require of you But to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."*

I think that Micah 6:8, I think that Amos 5, I think that Isaiah 58 and 60 and 61, Luke 4, I think passages like that invite us to connect that our walk with God, our worship of God, our connectedness with God invites a way of living in the world that is kind and compassionate and good and just and right.

And that we cannot say that we love God and not love our brother or our neighbor. We can't say that. And in that to love our neighbor as ourself, to proclaim the gospel by freeing people, loving people, [00:52:00] healing people. So I think that for me, the flourishing of all humanity, that human flourishing, is the mandate and the results of our worship.

Connection with God moves us to pursue the flourishing of others. If we worship God, if we sing a bunch of songs, I don't care how long you're singing for, how long you sing, or what you think is happening, you sing some songs, you read some Scripture, you do your devotionals, you go to church, and your life is not marked by kindness, compassion and justice, then I'm going to ask a question about who it is you're worshipping.

Rasool Berry: Because the scriptures would ask that question as well, right?

Sandra Van Opstal: That's where I got it.

Rasool Berry: One of the ways that, that you express that, um, compassion and empathy that I thought was so beautiful, you know, in the next version where you talked about your wedding, and the levels of complexity, it was to try to think through [00:53:00] accommodating the various people, cultures, foods, you know, expressions that were there.

Um, tell us a little bit about that, and also, you know, your husband, because you mentioned he supported that move toward education. But we haven't, you know, heard a little bit about how y'all met, and the role that he plays in your life as a partner and vice versa.

Sandra Van Opstal: So my husband is the three W's. He's white, he's wealthy, and he's from Wisconsin. So he's like the opposite of me in every way, personality and all the things. It was so hard to figure out how to honor all of the people that were connected to us. Because it wasn't just that I was coming from a Latina tradition and he was coming from white Wisconsin, mid America with all of his Polish glory.

Um, but we also had friends that were coming from all over the world, and family members from two different countries. And, and so I think part of what we wanted to do in our wedding was to celebrate the common [00:54:00] values we had. Like, why were we together? But we really want to see God glorified. And we felt that God was ultimately most glorified when the diversity of His creation was elevated and upheld.

Um, and our service was bilingual, and it contained different parts of our cultural heritage. And then we walked out to a song that was written by a friend of mine, um, out of the Prayer of Assisi. It's make us an instrument, Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. And so a friend of mine wrote a song based off of that prayer and that's what we walked out towards. It was like, where there is hatred, let us love.

You know, so it's like, that's that prayer as kind of like the benediction of both our marriage and the congregation is like, we want to be a family that like, where people so hatred, let us so love, you know. Where people so evil and injustice, let us so kindness [00:55:00] and goodness. And that's why we're here together so that we can make a space where we can be transformed into Christ's image and then live this kind of life. That was the hope, right? That was the hope. I don't know how we're doing.

Rasool Berry: You also said something in *The Next Worship* that I just got to ask you about because I think it was such a prolific statement. *“The biggest barrier Christians face in developing communities hospitable to people of every ethnicity and culture is their ignorance about their own culture. We are unaware of what it means to be us, and hyper aware of what it means to be them.”*

Why would you say that the biggest barrier you've seen in us being able to be that kind of vision of, uh, you know, the type of inclusion that we see in heaven? Um, how is that barrier experienced because we can't see our own culture?

Sandra Van Opstal: I did say that. Um, and I believe it. Uh, the [00:56:00] issue of normalizing is important because we could normalize something without any bad intentions. Like, we normalize a monolingual church experience because that's just what most of us have, a monolingual one language church experience. Uh, we don't think to ourselves, how do people that speak another language engage this church service? Because we're just not, that's not our reality. So our children's church right now in Spanish is 30 kids big. Our English children's church is 15 kids. And so we're having to ask the question, do we move their rooms?

Because a year ago, we had no Spanish kids church. And so we're going to have to ask questions like, what, what's equitable and just and how we're using space in this building? Because why are we normalizing that the English service gets the bigger space? I mean, those are, those are all questions we ask only when we're exposed to those new realities, right?

So I think that is the, the hardest thing for people who have grown up in a culture as the majority. [00:57:00] And the tricky thing about it is now the majority, the majority of our Christian siblings are not in the West. Maybe 11, 12 percent of the global Christians are located in the West. Europe, Australia, North America, US, Canada. And even of those percentages, many, many of those growing spaces and churches are actually communities of color.

Rasool Berry: Yeah.

Sandra Van Opstal: So if the majority of the church is in the South, in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, and we're hyphenating their theology, African theology, Latin American theology, Asian American theology, but we're still theology over here up in the space, then what are we saying and doing with that?

So it's not just about like understanding difference, it's about understanding power. So that's what we're doing. And in *Still Evangelical*, I write about [00:58:00] that same idea as I write about American Christianity as the universal donor.

Um, I, I'm O negative. So, O negative is a universal donor. I can give to everybody. Like when there's a tragedy, they're like, let me find O negative around here because anybody can receive my blood. But an O negative can only receive O negative blood.

And I believe that that's how The West has treated the rest of the church. We are the universal donor. You can receive our theology. You can receive our worship songs. You can receive our way of doing community. You can receive our understanding of God, but we cannot receive from you.

Rasool Berry: Wow. And that's why justice and worship are connected. Because what we say about God, and what we believe about God, and who we allow to inform those things, is a power dynamic, and it needs to be seen. Well, you've started something called Chasing [00:59:00] Justice. Tell us a little bit about that

Sandra Van Opstal: Yeah, so Chasing Justice is an experiment. Chasing Justice is a community of Christian activists that's looking to live a lifestyle of justice. And so what we've decided is we're going to be a community that's, that's led by people of color, because the people who understand what needs to happen to fix the injustice of the very people that are experiencing it.

So we've said we want it to be centering the voices of people of color. Um, but it's a journey for all of us. We're just going to be the leaders and the teachers in this journey. And it's going to be our experiences, and our theology that has often been silenced, that's going to be at the center leading the way.

We have, um, book clubs. We have a strong Instagram presence where we're trying to kind of disciple and form people through digital content. We have cohorts for leaders. We have a blog, we have podcasts. So it's really formation resources to help people navigate the intersection [01:00:00] of worship and justice, and what it means to live a lifestyle of justice, um, that's rooted in Scripture and Christian tradition, but that is centering the experiences of people of color in that journey.

If you want to change the world, know where you stand. If you want to be culturally sensitive, know your own culture. Know who God has made you. so

that you know the distance between you and someone else, and you can practice bridging that gap.

Rasool Berry: This is *Where You're From?*. I'm Rasool Berry, and remember, it's not just about where you're at. It's also about where you're from. This show was produced by Ryan Clevenger, Mary Jo Clark, and Jade Gussman, and was engineered by Kevin Burgess. I also want to thank Leah and Nicole for their help in supporting and promoting *Where You're From?*. Thanks y'all.



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