

KASS UNGER INTERVIEWS JANNÉ GROVER

Kass: Let's start with who are you and what do you do?

Janné: I'm Janné Grover, and I serve Community of Christ on the Council of Twelve Apostles. I have a function assignment with formation ministries, which is a broad umbrella that includes spiritual formation and all ministries of forming disciples and communities. I also have a field assignment in the Central USA Mission Field.

Kass: I caught that spiritual formation is forming disciples is that the correct definition?

Janné: This is my definition, but not something you'll necessarily find if you look it up. I consider spiritual formation essentially growing in the life of God. Holistic spiritual formation is all of these practices, these ministries, these ways of awakening us to the divine in the whole of life. It's all of creation, every stage of our lives, in all of life circumstances. Spiritual formation is growing in the awareness that all things are spiritual, and the sacred is around us in everyday life. It's not a compartmentalised activity at church, or something you do when you're ready, it is embracing and growing into the awareness and nurturing that as part of the whole of life. When I said formation ministries is this large spiritual formation umbrella, it's what nurtures and engages all the spirituality types; the head, the heart, the spirit, and our compassionate action. All of it is part of nurturing holistic spiritual formation, which is growing in the life of God.

Kass: I like how it relates to life rather than something we just do in class time for 20 minutes.

Janné: We tend to look at different things we do, and we've viewed them separately as spiritual formation and disciple formation and worship and mission, but all is part of holistic spiritual formation. It's all that nurtures us, that develops us, that opens our awareness to God and to each other, and teaches us to be curious about the world around us and see a bigger picture of it.

I get the question a lot, what's the difference between spiritual formation and disciple formation? Well, there is no difference. It's all part of holistic spiritual formation in my mind and framework.

Kass: Why is this important for children and youth?

Janné: I love this question. My initial response is what could be more important? At the heart is that it gives us a richer meaning and purpose and helps us center ourselves in a place of belovedness and holy curiosity.

For children and youth, it's important for them to feel this connection to something that's bigger, but also to recognise their worth, importance, and value as beloved children of God at whatever their age or stage of development. It's not something they do or contribute to when they are older, but recognising they are part of this God life, which is bigger than just themselves. That's hard to grasp for a younger child, but it affirms the importance of children and youth in the community, as part of the community, not just the church of the future, but understanding their place and purpose in the church community today. It makes me think of this hymn, "Teach me God to wonder, teach me God to see, let your world of beauty capture me." From a mindset of a child or youth, that's what I would want them to internalise about spiritual formation. It's being captured by God and being captured by the beauty of the world around them, recognising all of that is sacred, and that they have an important place in all of it.

Kass: How can congregations support children and families in spiritual formation in their ministries? Essentially what can congregations do?

Janné: I wish I had a perfect answer that would be easy to implement. First of all, it's affirming everything that I just shared. I don't think anybody would argue or NOT view children as essential in the life of the body. However, sometimes we view things at our age or development or preference, whatever that is, and not through the eyes of children. Take everything you do as a congregation, and what if you held up that lens of how does this engage children? Or how are we engaging children? How are we supporting children? And how are we creating this safe space for children and youth to question, to discover, to explore, and even to doubt. I think that's really important, as much as creating a foundation, creating safe space for this all to develop.

I think it's also important to shift from what our expectations are for children's engagement to asking what do children and families and youth need from the congregation or from the community? How can we support them? How can we shape what we do around engaging different ages and stages of development?


Kass: Do you have an example?

Janné: One thing, and not just particular to pandemic conditions, is asking how can we engage children in our worship, whatever that looks like, whether we're in person or online? How can we look at activities that are more engaging? But rather than planning or taking everything that we do in typical congregation life and just moving it online, asking the question,



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what do children need? Or what do families need to help in this time of trauma and crisis and pandemic and isolation? That shifts a focus away from just moving congregational life online to how we can safely engage with their activities in person? Maybe children are engaging in sports because it's safe to do that outside, so the community goes to support that and be a presence in aspects of their life outside of congregational life. That's one example. Another is inviting children and youth to give input to the leadership of a congregation, so they are part of the conversation about what is meaningful in our worship experience or in our life together. Invite their ideas so that their voices are valued as part of the conversation and the planning.

Kass: A lot of our congregations don't have children. They don't have youth. What can families, grandparents or caregivers, do outside of a church context to support spiritual formation?

Janné: I think this is an essential aspect and involves some development on the part of everyone. I think one of the most important things we can do for children is to frame a more inclusive understanding of God, as loving and inclusive, and thinking about the language that we use is powerful and formational. We also have to recognise the need for it to be developmentally appropriate.

When my daughter was younger, we were in a spiritual formation retreat for families, and somebody asked, "Does your family do the practice of examen?" My daughter looks at me and says, "We don't do that, do we?" We do it every single day, we just don't call it that. This simple rhythm of asking where did you see God today? Or how did you experience love today? Or how did you share with somebody today? Those kinds of things are part of nurturing awareness of God in the whole of life. It's a spiritual practice of examen, but it's relatable for a young person.

Practices of prayer, practices of generosity are an important part of everyday life and how those are woven in and conversations, asking questions, and being that safe space for curiosity are all really important.

Life is messy, and chaotic, and family life is stressful sometimes. It's finding meaning in the midst of all of that. Here's a couple of examples. When the kids were little, at bedtime, when everything is supposed to be settling down, and I'm super tired and worn out, that's the time that my kids would get ramped up. It was kind of crazy, and I wasn't my best self, and I raised

my voice. I was kissing my oldest goodnight, and I said, "Zach, I'm so sorry. I was not my best self." And he said, "Mom, you're the best mom I have." Kind of like, 'I've got to take you or leave you'. But there was just something in that moment that was so sweet. And I said, "You are grace to me." And then he said, "I'm just trying to be the best disciple I can be." That tender moment was more sacred than any kind of fantastic worship experience. It was experiencing and recognising the grace that he extended in that moment.

Another time, our house was broken into. When the police were there and investigating, I was taking the kids over to my sister's so that they were out of that environment. In the car, there was questioning about why would somebody do this? Why did they do this to us? In that moment, I said, "We don't know anything about who this is, or what their life circumstance is. Maybe they're desperate for something, so let's just pause and pray." It was just shifting that moment to recognising another life. For me, the essence of prayer is pulling us out of ourselves and into the conditions of others. So anything that we can do to increase mindfulness and connectedness for kids in our home life, as part of spiritual formation, is really critical.

Kass: As a minority religion in a religious landscape, how do we help children and youth navigate pop religion?

Janné: We need to help shift the narrative without condemning. Asking why do religious trends promote this belief and we don't? One of the things that is important for me is looking honestly and critically at our children's songs, and even campfire songs. Addressing how pervasive "he" language is for God. "My God is so big, so strong, and so mighty, there's nothing that he cannot do." It's very easy to shift that to "there's nothing my God cannot do". And even that's an all-powerful image instead of an all-loving God, but still more inclusive. Looking at those songs that transcend a denomination, or are fun songs, and asking how they support or are contrary to a narrative of a loving, inclusive God; how they honour the worth of all persons and an expanding understanding of God, that is not just a male figure in a heavenly place, but this presence of love and goodness in the world.

Kass: Then, how do we both support the current theology and the tradition (particular campfire songs) that have been sung for 30 plus years?

Janné: Recently, at the high school camp, I challenged the camp to eliminate 'he' language and see what that

felt like. They took it out of campfire songs, but then they were trying to take the word 'he' out of everything. I thought, "Well, Jesus, as far as we know, was a male person, so perhaps that he language is OK." It was interesting to start their thinking, and that is part of it. To give an example, with the hymnal project, it was looking across the whole of the project. Every single song may not have full inclusive language, but there is expanded imagery and inclusive language throughout our hymnody. And I think that's part of honouring the tradition. Sometimes it just doesn't sing well to shift the words, or sometimes we need to accept that this song doesn't support where we are and it's not ok for us to sing it anymore.

Kass: *Thank you very much for talking with me*

Janné: Well, thank you for the invitation and for the questions. I think they're really important, and I wish I had the absolute answers, but I think that whenever we just invest our best interests in the lives of children, that is the best start to helping families and nurturing children and youth.



The Gratefulness Game

Number of players: 2-4

Age: 3+

You will need a dice and 4 player tokens

How to play:

- Each player begins on the start square.
- To decide who goes first, each player rolls the dice. Whoever rolls the highest number will begin the game.
- Simply roll the dice and move your player token along the board.
- The first player to pass finish square is the winner!

PLAY ON THE NEXT PAGE

