

Agency for Change Podcast: Debra McKnight, Founding Pastor of Urban Abbey

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, the podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing, and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change and these are the people who show us how.

Kelley Peterson:

Hello, fellow changemakers. This is Kelley Peterson, non-profit creative director from KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today, we are talking with Reverend Debra McKnight, founding pastor of Urban Abbey, a non-profit fair trade coffee shop, bookstore and church located in Omaha's Old Market.

Kelley Peterson:

Urban Abbey is a place of inclusion and hospitality that works to build relationships and community, serving as a hub of productivity for professionals and students. Urban Abbey is a space for meaningful events and a home for modern worship. And I cannot wait to learn more. Debra, how are you doing today?

Debra McKnight:

Hi. Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Kelley Peterson:

Good. I'm so glad. Debra, Urban Abbey's mission states, "We believe the world should be different, and so we are a space of radical hospitality connecting people to God and one another in everyday life." Can you share your views on how the world should be different?

Debra McKnight:

Well, there a lot of ways the world should be different, but my hope is founded in the idea that if we can see each other as sacred—if we can see each other as important and valued and worthy—then we can treat one another in that way.

Debra McKnight:

And that is an individual relationship, but more importantly and with more impact, that's a communal and social relationship. That's how we change, how we decide what we do in community, how we change laws, how we structure life, how we move forward together. And so Urban Abbey is a hub for how we live seeing one another as sacred, valuable and creative, and how we empower one another in terms of like hospitality. One thing that we are really intentional about as a Christian church—as a progressive Christian Church—is not everyone has felt safe in Christian spaces, not everyone has been treated well or fairly or appropriately.

Debra McKnight:

There's been a lot of hurt and wounding in the name of a loving presence, which is a huge problem. And I spend most of my time telling people, "We're not that," "I'm not that pastor," or "We're not that church." So I explain that the Abbey is welcoming to Christians, non-Christians, and people who are annoyed by Christians, and we try to be intentional about supporting and welcoming in ways where the church has most recently failed.

Kelley Peterson:

That is so inspiring. Your mission is full of interesting words that I haven't heard a church use before. The other phrase that I'm fascinated with that really stands out to me is "space of radical hospitality." What does this phrase mean to you and how does Urban Abbey embody it?

Debra McKnight:

Early Christians were known for hospitality. Christianity is born out of this risk-taking hospitality where people gave of themselves, they let go of the cultural norms of who's most important gets to eat first, or these people you can eat with and these people you cannot, and these people get to be seated in this special spot and those people will get better weight.

Debra McKnight:

Radical hospitality for me in the Abbey means we're open all the time—our space is structured around being used all the time instead of one hour a week for worship. It's a lovely, delightful, holy space, but it's not structured like a normal sanctuary.

Debra McKnight:

And it's a sanctuary that's alive all the time, you can come in early and late, you can get what you need, and we host all kinds of hard conversations there. We've been able to really welcome people into conversations and allow people to feel safe.

Debra McKnight:

I mean hard conversations like immigration reform or human trafficking or health care reform. Before the coronavirus, we were probably having two or three of these kinds of big programs a month.

Kelley Peterson:

And just that as a topic in and of itself—how to deal with the coronavirus—I'm sure those are also hard conversations because it's causing hard things to happen in our lives.

Debra McKnight:

Yeah.

Kelley Peterson:

So there are three words that you use right underneath your name, and those three words are coffee, cause and communion, and you use them to summarize what you do. Let's start with coffee. Can you share why you believe every cup is sacred?

Debra McKnight:

Well, every cup is sacred because it comes from this long journey, like the sun and the rain and the seed and the soil and the farmer's hands and everything that brings that coffee from the field to the barista to the person enjoying it. And I want to be really clear that this isn't like some kind of small Styrofoam cup that you find in a church fellowship hall. It's good coffee. And we try to use coffee that's fairly sourced from small farms or from certified fair trade organic farms.

Debra McKnight:

And we also try to make sure that our staff is supported in the work that they do to try to make this a space of hospitality so that everything is warm and everyone receives welcome when they come in. And that it's a safe place to be who you are no matter what your journey has looked like. We hope you feel welcome, and that cup of coffee or tea is the first step.

Debra McKnight:

I know there are some folks who are not coffee drinkers and like to confess that they didn't drink coffee when they first started coming to the Abbey. The coffee is really just the medium we use to connect with people and make space to be present with people in a way that is life-giving and nurturing—and not just to church people. Nobody has to think, *Am I dressed okay to walk into a coffee shop?* Like they do when they think, *How are people dressed for this church?*

Kelley Peterson:

So you've completely become a coffee drinker now?

Debra McKnight:

Yeah, and it's not even because of the coffee. Although I do barista, and so I feel like I need to know enough about the coffee to not just say, "Well, would you like some of our fine teas?" But it was really after my daughter was born. I was like, "Wow, this has a lot more caffeine, I'm going to need this!"

Debra McKnight:

That converted me all the way to coffee. So we didn't start a coffee shop because I love coffee or because I wanted the coffee to be super fancy—like every bean just crafted so well—but because the point of the coffee is how to make this the most loving, most friendly, most compassionate space. And the coffee is an aesthetic of that.

Kelley Peterson:

That's definitely a definition of when you were saying it's good coffee and you're not talking about just the flavor of it.

Debra McKnight:

Right.

Kelley Peterson:

For sure. And not only is this good coffee, it does all kinds of good too, because since 2011, Urban Abbey has donated more than \$100,000 to local non-profits to do life-giving work in Omaha. Tell us about this risky business model that you have that's changing the world.

Debra McKnight:

Yeah, it's not a great business model. If we had waited until we made a profit, our giving would be pretty low. We give 10 percent of every sale—so every latte, every coffee, everything adds up—and each month we have a different partner. Each month that partner does some kind of co-host programs and learning opportunities with us. We celebrate their work, we get to come alongside their work. One of my favorite partners is Nebraska Appleseed. I feel like they've grown the same time as the Abbey has grown. We'll be 10 years old next November. They started small, and we're just all growing together, and they do such important work advocating. So we'll give 10 percent of our sales.

Debra McKnight:

We don't tell the organization how they have to use it and we don't attach strings to how the organization uses it. So it really helps other non-profits to fund their gaps or fund those kinds of spaces where there's not a specific grant for that money—or it's just a gift.

Debra McKnight:

Part of the Christian tradition is generosity. Churches will talk about generosity in terms of folks giving to fuel the church, which don't get me wrong is important. But as a spiritual practice, it's hard for individuals, just like it's hard for the community. And so it gives us an opportunity to practice that together. At the beginning, there were some gift checks where I was like, "Oh wait, we can really use that." And I've even had coaches along the way who've said, "You need to stop doing that. The Abbey may not exist."

Debra McKnight:

I talked to our board and we thought about it and we were unwilling to let it go. My spouse is an accountant, and he does projections for Mutual of Omaha, so legit accounting projections.

Debra McKnight:

There was a time when he said, "You're going to close in 12 months. You're going to run out of money." And I said, "Well, what if this happens, and this, then this?" And he showed me his magic spreadsheet and said, "18 months then if these incredibly unlikely things happen." At that point we thought about not giving any more, and we took this really hard step of moving our organization out from a parent organization, because my time was split between two faith communities, and I felt like we hadn't done everything we could and I didn't want to give up yet.

Debra McKnight:

So we took this risky step of becoming an independent organization, which meant we had to learn a lot of new logistics that were being managed by another church at first. And in that first year giving to the Abbey doubled. We received so much, and I think there's no other way to respond to generosity than generosity. I feel really grateful that we never changed course even when it was looking problematic and it was super reasonable to say, "Let's give five percent." And so we've been able to give to more than 24 partners at this time. And we try to use some partners over and over so we have a real sustainable impact in their work.

Debra McKnight:

And so we're really partners, not just sort of a one-time charity.

Kelley Peterson:

What a success story! And to look back and say, "Next November we're going to be 10 years old and we were able to sustain this, and not only sustain it but also give away \$100,000 to non-profits." So, wow, that is an incredible story! But a big part of your mission is connecting people to God, how does the word communion fit in to what you do every day, especially on Sundays?

Debra McKnight:

We host communion three times on Sundays at 9 a.m., 11 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. Originally we just did 5:30, then we kept adding more space as more people came. Our average weekly attendance when we started was like 30.

Debra McKnight:

And in a weekend between the three services the average is about 175. And we don't have a particularly large space, so every inch matters. We scoot everyone around, and on incredibly full services I ask people—the people who've been there the longest—to sit on the floor occasionally. But we have an open table. Everybody's welcome at our communion table. There's no membership requirement, there's no requirement. "All you have to be is hungry" is what I say. Everybody should be able to come if they'd like. We also try to create space for questions and discussion during worship, and I try to create space where people listen to each other instead of just to me. I always try to make space for the less heard voices within the Christian tradition.

Debra McKnight:

I would say we're sort of unapologetically feminist. I'll use feminine language for God, we'll use non-gender, we'll use they and their pronouns for God alongside the masculine normative pronouns or names. And I try to be really clear that we are exploring this vast presence, and that there's questions, more questions than answers.

Debra McKnight:

And that's a part of why we gather for worship, it's a part of why folks do small groups together—to explore it more deeply. It's a part of why we have a grow night where you can take a step deeper and explore or have conversations. The first gathering was called Wesley Pub and people could bring beer or wine, and I'd use a Colbert clip and some feminist poetry, and then a song that people don't really hear in church. And so we grew out of doing this weird church experiment of church with beer and wine. I did get invited to our bishop's office about that whole church experience. And I think it must've sounded wilder than it was. I showed her pictures and then she said, "Well, can you do it with just coffee?" And I said, "No, absolutely not like I couldn't, no way."

Debra McKnight:

And then a few years later we have a coffee shop. So we started with this like, "How do we make space for people who don't usually feel comfortable in church? How do we make space for folks who identify as agnostic or atheist? How do we make space for folks who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender who have been hurt by the church?"

Debra McKnight:

I had one person complain to me, "Why do you have to be so aggressive about inclusion?" I said, "Well, you're the first person who's called me aggressive, but I like it." And because the church has been so cruel, I think we have to be right out front and say, "We march in pride parade, we do weddings for everybody." Inclusion is about not just sort of being nice on Sunday. It's about really showing up in people's lives in ways that matter.

Kelley Peterson:

I love that. Really showing up in people's lives in ways that matter. Those are incredible words. Wow! I know that these times people can't gather like they used to last March through Soul for Loops. So the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges, and I'm curious how this has impacted the work you've been doing?

Debra McKnight:

Yeah. The first thing is that we are not doing worship in person—we're not gathering. And I think one of the strengths of the Abbey was the warmth that people feel. And so I have a community of folks who really grieve. I try online, but that warmth is harder to convey, it's harder to actually feel when there's no hugs. People have to get their own bread. It's much more self-service.

Debra McKnight:

So we miss being together, of course, and we've had to find weird opportunities to be together. If I had a normal church with Allon, I probably would have done things outside all summer, but I don't have a normal church with Allon, and so I borrowed lawns from other churches, like we did services together and then we started doing curbside services.

So we have stations where you do different things like lighting a candle, reading a poem, writing a memory or some kind of creative adventure. We included cleaning up trash, writing notes to teachers—we've just done some unusual things.

Debra McKnight:

So that that's been one of the main changes. And then our coffee shop—I feel like it's not worth it to put staff folks at risk. And so our coffee shop closed for a while, we reduced our hours, we closed to just curbside for a while and let folks order books and fair trade jewelry and whatever online. We did some private shopping hours, like super fancy. You can make an appointment to shop at the Urban Abbey.

Debra McKnight:

And now we've reopened the front door, but we haven't had folks sitting down and drinking coffee all day long because I feel like they're not going to keep their masks on, and I just ...

Kelley Peterson:

... Need to keep people safe.

Debra McKnight:

Yeah. I just don't feel like we can take that risk. There was a point where I had to decide, "Are we a church with a coffee shop or a coffee shop with a church?" And if we're making a decision that feels appropriate to our values, keeping folks safe and keeping public health awareness feels more in line with who we are.

Debra McKnight:

So that's been a big change, and our space is pretty small. Other churches have sanctuaries that seat like 800 people, and we might've done something inside but we're super cozy at 80 people, so I don't know. I do not want to be the reason people get sick.

Kelley Peterson:

Absolutely! You have told me, Debra, so many stories in our short time today about how you connect people, how the Urban Abbey just is there for people and for what matters in people's lives. You help them explore new ideas and engage in meaningful conversations. What are some of the greatest stories you've heard that demonstrate the outcome of your work?

Debra McKnight:

Yeah, some of the best moments are when ... So once a month (pre-COVID) we had a drag queen story hour, and the first month this happened, the ACLU called us and they were like, "You're going to get protesters. We're going to come down and help." And I was like, "Oh, okay, great." They came down. There were no protesters. I was like, "Oh yeah, we're fine. Great."

Debra McKnight:

The next month we had drag queen story hour and we had protesters, and they were aggressive protesters. They came in and yelled expletives in front of a room of like 60 kids and parents. And they were big. They came all the way from South Dakota to do this. So then even the other protesters—there were mild-mannered protesters and then the South Dakota protesters—and even the mild-mannered protesters were like, "We're not with them."

Debra McKnight:

So then every month we start having this choir of Abbey folks outside welcoming people, singing, trying to be friendly instead of being like the protesters yelling at kids and families. And so over this time we have folks staying in conversation. Like if one of the protesters is open to it, some of our leaders would just chat them up, looking for common ground and working on this to the point where they get to know each other's names.

Debra McKnight:

And then there's this one protester who comes every month, and then she hugs one of our leaders at the end of every conversation because she's stayed in conversation. And it doesn't mean the protester agreed with her. She'd be really clear like, "I don't think you meant to scare that child, right?" And the protester would say, "Well, I didn't scare them, but they should be afraid to go into that place."

Debra McKnight:

And she'd say, "Well, that child grabbed his dad's leg much more tightly," and that's not a gesture of feeling safe. And so the protester would be like, "Oh yeah. Okay." And so I've seen these protesters hug at the end of the time, and then they're like, "Are you going to be here next month?"

Debra McKnight:

And so I feel like this is one of the weirdest unplanned things, like we have a lot of weird unplanned things that happen in our space because we're in an urban location and it's like you just have to be flexible.

Kelley Peterson:

And open to it.

Debra McKnight:

And open.

Kelley Peterson:

It's really neat that occurred organically.

Debra McKnight:

Right, it just happened that way. The other thing is that I feel like a lot of churches do service projects—like you're going to go serve at this kitchen or go to some other country—and then you go vote in a way that has no affirmation for why people are struggling in the world.

Debra McKnight:

So we've been able to help when people are taking signatures for Medicaid expansion or we've been a space for registering folks to vote. And that has led to some interesting conversations too. One guy who comes in all the time I guess decided that he couldn't support us trying to sign people up for Medicaid.

Debra McKnight:

And so we were able to have a conversation about that, where I don't know if there's any other space in his week that someone would talk about it. I really think people should have health care, like this is something we can do. It's something worthy of our investment. I'm really tired of health care by church spaghetti feed or GoFundMe or whatever.

Debra McKnight:

So we have these kinds of unusual conversations, and they're never planned. They're always like, "Are you in a good space where you can be present with people?" whether you're on staff or whether you're a leader who's helping with that event. I think we ask people to be flexible in a way they're not used to at a lot of churches or even workplaces. And there's just some really good moments that come out of it.

Debra McKnight:

It's definitely something we've been working on and trying to figure out for a long time. And then there's some moments like when one of our homeless neighbors—who hasn't eaten and needs a lot of mental health care that he's not getting or medication he's not taking—and so he's shouting expletives. We have this Easter egg extravaganza and we have 4-H there with baby chicks. And we have a camp there with baby bunnies.

Debra McKnight:

And the big garden project is there helping kids plant seeds, so there's a room full of families and kids. And this man is in the corner shouting expletives, and there's just no good way to manage it. So I just

grabbed two of our delightful boomers. I'm like, "Okay, Jim and Kathy, you're going to come with me and we're going to talk to him. We're going to be like a human barrier, and we're going to give him a sandwich and see if we can get him to sit down, then we're going to see what services he needs help with."

Debra McKnight:

If these two church people had been at their old church I don't think they would have done that.

Kelley Peterson:

And what great feelings they probably had because they did have that experience just with life and people.

Debra McKnight:

And it's real ...

Kelley Peterson:

Yes, this is real. So let's switch gears a little bit and talk about your story. How did your path lead you to this kind of work, Debra?

Debra McKnight:

Sometimes I think I got here on accident, but I find that I start things—whether it was in middle school trying to start an ecology club at my church, or in high school, or just different times in seminary kind of testing what is needed and what we can do to explore it or create it.

Debra McKnight:

I grew up in the United Methodist Church. I actually lived across the street from the church in Plattsmouth, so just South of Omaha, a town that's not really famous for being progressive. But the Methodist church has been ordaining women since the 1950s. And even though I never had a woman as a pastor, I also never thought, *Oh, women can't be pastors*. It's just a leader. people have mentioned to me their concerns since then about women being pastors in general, or specifically about me being a pastor, but it didn't occur to me that this was a problem.

Debra McKnight:

So I just moved ahead not knowing that unfortunately, all of this exists. In college, I got a minor in women's studies, and so I learned about this structure, then I started to experience it more directly. I felt like being a pastor was kind of a place where I could use my gifts the best, and I had mentioned this to my grandpa. Everyone in my family is a medical professional except my grandparents, they're teachers.

Debra McKnight:

And so he's like, "You know, you'll make more money if you stick with the family thing." He knows what it's like to be a teacher and to do every extra job you can at the school. And until I was in college, I thought, *Well ... maybe*. And then all of a sudden I was like, *No, I'm going to be a pastor*. and I just told my mom; I blurted it out. And I was like, "Okay."

Debra McKnight:

So I started down that track, and in-between I married my high school sweetheart. Finding the person you're going to marry when you're 16 does not always work out, but the best part about that marriage was he was in the Air Force, so I got to live in Germany and see a different part of the world.

Debra McKnight:

When our marriage ended, I was like, "Yeah, I'm going to seminary now." So I went to seminary in Texas at SMU, because it had been super snowy in Nebraska. I realize that's not a great reason to choose Dallas over Chicago, but it was one of them for sure.

Debra McKnight:

And I felt drawn to that seminary—the Southern Methodist University had more theological diversity. I was also looking at Garrett at Northwest. I went from this space of surviving the end of my marriage to really thriving there. And so I'm so grateful it was a place of learning and exploring. They let me try on all these weird projects there too.

Debra McKnight:

Historically, the larger campus is pretty conservative, and I worked for the women's center there because I already had a master's in education before I went to seminary. And so I've worked at the women's center for the Gay-Straight Alliance. For National Coming Out Day we made this picnic on the front, like the centerpiece of SMU's campus, with rainbow balloons.

Debra McKnight:

But I couldn't find anyone to bring food, so my mom drove food down from Nebraska. And it wasn't just like a sack lunch, it was brisket and cheesy potatoes, but they won't even let us heat it up on the campus. And so I get invited to the university president's office. "How did this happen?" he asked. I was like, "Well, I filled out this form and got the signature and then got the signature," and then we had National Coming Out Day on the mall. So it was sort of a great space to try out new things within systems, which is how the Abbey started too. We're still connected to the United Methodist Church.

Debra McKnight:

The church has funded us too. The beginning capital came from the church, even though the church struggles with a lot of what I'm doing. I make them incredibly nervous all the time, but they still fund me.

Kelley Peterson:

I just think that is you. You just push it and I love that. You push it but you also follow what you need to follow and appreciate those systems at the same time and say, "Okay, I understand and appreciate the structure you have here, but what if we do this?" And you keep on. You're not scared or frightened of being told "That's not how we normally do it." That's not a phrase that's in your vocabulary that affects you, and that is just wonderful.

Debra McKnight:

Wow!

Kelley Peterson:

So speaking of being an inspiration and helping others, or role model for others who experience that pushback, what advice do you have for leaders who want to inspire change?

Debra McKnight:

I think having it as a deep sense of why you're pursuing this, and not for your own ego, because I don't feel like that will work—or at least that won't work in the end. It doesn't work in the kind of work that I'm aiming for. Certainly, I have some ego to deal with at times. And it gets bruised. I think pursuing something out of compassion and love is always going to cause more people to come alongside you.

Debra McKnight:

And I think finding other people who can remind you of how important this is and stand with you is important. And people who can work with you to do things that are unusual, like the Abbey has been protected at different times. Find that kind of parent church. They protected us to do Wesley Pub, right?

Debra McKnight:

I wasn't technically breaking any rules, but I had permission from the very few people who I needed permission from. And so also I think knowing the systems well enough to work within them while tweaking them has been a helpful tool for me because it takes some of the institutional resources, which are usually more vast than I have.

Debra McKnight:

And we can find little ways to leverage institutional resources for change. That may not work in every system, but that's been in education and in the larger Methodist church. Knowing the system well enough to be able to tweak it and to push back in the right ways, and in the ways that challenge people to think, has been one of the strategies I've had found helpful.

Kelley Peterson:

So very strategic, very intentional, and very creative in being knowledgeable about those resources, but then how to use them, for sure.

Debra McKnight:

And I think also being coachable, right?

Kelley Peterson:

Yes, and adaptable, flexible.

Debra McKnight:

Yeah, that's it. Most new church starts don't make it past five years, about one in five. And most of them are started by men and they all look the same. They're like a cute white guy who plays a guitar, has a piercing or a tattoo, but not both.

Debra McKnight:

I go to these meetings and people say, "Oh, are you Craig's wife?" And I was like, "No, I am a pastor, we have been ordaining women since 1950. What is your problem?" And these guys who are starting churches at the same time as me, they have all closed. I would say it's because they are totally un-coachable. They're all about their own personal charisma. And that can only go so far.

Kelley Peterson:

And at times it could be seen as trendy, maybe?

Debra McKnight:

Oh, of course.

Debra McKnight:

They think they're invincible, there's no room for vulnerability and it's all like a domination system, right? Like, "We're going to get all these people to come in here and do this thing that we want them to do," instead of, "Let's connect with as many people as possible and see what we can make happen together." So I'm sort of alone at new church start meetings, which I mostly don't go to now.

Kelley Peterson:

Well, after almost a 10-year tenure.

Debra McKnight:

I'm not really new anymore.

Kelley Peterson:

I think you've made it well past, you've made it an additional five years after the five-year mark.

Debra McKnight:

That's right. That's right.

Kelley Peterson:

So, Debra, could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom that could serve as inspiration to our listeners?

Debra McKnight:

I think the most important thing is to embrace uncertainty and to learn from uncertainty. I think that we all have this idol of certainty, this idol of like, "Oh, these are the next steps." Things are just never as sure as they seem. I think no matter how big or how old or how long an institution or business or non-profit has been there, see what we can learn from uncertainty. I think also making space to honor vulnerability and to name vulnerability, not in a way that limits your capacity to approach what makes you afraid or what makes you feel nervous, but naming it in terms of honoring what makes us uncertain.

Debra McKnight:

Let's honor these spaces of vulnerability, and let's step forward together.

Kelley Peterson:

Right, let's step forward together. For our listeners who would like to learn more about your work and support you, how can they find out more about Urban Abbey?

Debra McKnight:

Well, you can watch us online on Sundays at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. You can go onto our website at theurbanabbey.org, and I have a little website now kindly designed by Ashley called urbanabbott.org, which goes into a little bit more. It has some of the things that I've written, a little bit more about the story of the Abbey. And there's a donation button on both of them. If anybody feels like fueling our work, we would be ever grateful.

Kelley Peterson:

As it should be. As we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about Urban Abbey?

Debra McKnight:

Well, I like them. If there's a way that we can connect or help or join them in something, whether it's their individual exploration of faith or spirituality or social justice or their non-profit or their business, we would be so glad to meet them and connect with them and hear what they're up to and be a part of how we make the world better together. Because it's going to take more people—it's going to take all of us.

Kelley Peterson:

It's going to take all of us.

Debra McKnight:

And we want to make space for everybody.

Kelley Peterson:

Debra, thank you for sharing how Urban Abbey builds relationships and community through a space of inclusion, and of course that radical hospitality we talked about. I appreciate you joining me today.

Debra McKnight:

Thank you so much. Thank you.

Announcer:

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