



Center for Congregations
PODCAST

Kicked Off a Cliff
Grappling with rapid change - a conversation
with pastor and leadership expert Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

In this time period, if you are not an authentic leader, people wouldn't follow you. If you were standing up in the midst of a pandemic acting as though we are not in dire straits and we're not in the time period you've never seen before, people will not trust you.

Alisha Agnew:

Welcome to the Center for Congregations Podcast. This is a conversation for anyone invested in sustaining and strengthening their faith communities. The Center for Congregations is an Indiana nonprofit that exists because we believe the work of your congregation is essential.

Our mission is to strengthen your congregation, helping you find the right information or expertise for your congregations' needs. We're able to do this work because of the generosity of the Lilly Endowment.

Ben Tapper:

Hi everyone and welcome back to another week of the Center for Congregations Podcast. I'm Ben Tapper, an associate for resource consulting with the central office.

Matt Burke:

And I'm Matt Burke, the education director and the Northeast director in the Fort Wayne office.

Ben Tapper:

And Matt, we just had a really enriching conversation with our guest this week, Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes, and I thought it was really rich and invigorating to hear her talk about how they have managed to shift and transform their systems in the midst of this pandemic. But I'm wondering what insights did you glean from it, especially as it relates to our work?

Matt Burke:

Yeah. Well, I'm really excited about the interview because this is the first episode we've had so far where we actually have a congregational practitioner. So Gabby is the founding co-pastor of Double Love Experience in Brooklyn, New York. So it's just really great to hear from someone who is in the trenches as it were in congregational life, and the overarching topic of the conversation was about change. And we're in the midst of the pandemic, and we've recorded this in September. It'll be releasing in October, and who knows what changes we'll see in the next month or you might be listening to this in '21. And you'll be on the other side of a lot of those changes. But a lot of changes happened. And so I

think it's been really interesting to see... Interesting's probably too neutral of a term. But to see everything that's been going on in congregational life.

So I think it might be worthwhile for you and I to talk a little bit about what we've seen in our work with congregations about changes that have been happening as a result of the pandemic, as a result of the racial situation happening. So many other things, the way politics are moving. Just a lot of turmoil right now.

Ben Tapper:

Absolutely. I was just thinking that. As I was reflecting on the interview, one thing stood out to me, especially as it relates to our work. And it's this idea that you can change a lot faster than you think you can when you really have to. And going through the Connect Through Tech grants that we've administered here at the Center for Congregations and seeing congregation after congregation just adapt to the use of technology, to livestreaming, to recording, sending out DVDs. I mean, congregational leaders are finding new... Maybe not new for everybody, but these methods are new for a lot of congregational leaders, especially in small towns and rural communities. So they are just kind of embracing these changes really rapidly. I mean, in a matter of months you saw entire services streaming online, and that normally would've taken certain congregations a year or more to try to get their ducks in a row and to vote and to get consensus. But there's a renewed sense of urgency with this pandemic that has really caused a lot of shifting for people. So I've been amazed at just how quickly congregations across the state have adapted to the demand for technology and the increased demand for access to their services.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. Absolutely. Not only just the changes there but it's not just about the technology necessarily or the equipment. But how do we as people, as the members of congregations adapt to community? How do we stay connected? How do we communicate well through the platforms and media that are available to us? And it's just been astonishing. One pastor in a conversation that I had with a group of congregations said it's like basically we've all been kicked off the cliff, and we've got to learn how to fly now. And I think that's an apt analogy.

So one of the things that I've seen, one of the positives that I've seen happen as a result of this is... I've heard a couple of congregations talk about how they've had a lot of younger people step up into positions of volunteering because they have certain skillsets that they know how to video edit. They know how livestreaming works. They kind of get YouTube. So some congregations I've heard pastors saying that they have either asked specifically people to step into those roles, and other congregations where younger people have stepped up and said, "Hey, we know how to do this. We really want to get involved." And just how the nature of volunteering has changed because the nature of the roles needed have changed.

Ben Tapper:

Absolutely. And in that same vein, congregations have found, at least several that I have spoken with have found that they are reaching more viewers through their livestream services than they ever were when they were meeting week to week in the pews, and they've been amazed at just how many people are joining to watch the livestream or watching the replay. And that has been a promising development for a lot of them.

And the other thing that I want to highlight isn't explicitly related to technology, but we've seen from several of our other grant programs, whether it's engaging young adults or formative power, that the uptick in awareness about the existence of issues like white privilege and systemic racism across the country has spread into congregations as well. So now you've had increased demand and urgency for congregational leaders to help their congregants figure out how to engage issues of racism, whether it's through a book study, through bringing in an expert to talk to them and help unpack this concept of systemic racism. I mean, congregation after congregation across our different grant programs are trying to figure out how do we help our people engage in these discussions and topics in meaningful ways. And that's frankly not something I expected to see at any time in the near future.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. It's interesting. I wonder about this as a hypothesis that I literally just came up with, so take it for what it's worth.

Ben Tapper:

Those are the best.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. But now that congregations are online more and involved more in social media, I wonder if this is going to make a change in cultural dialogue because now congregations are more in the arenas where more cultural dialogue is happening. And if some of that awareness is not a result of that, that suddenly because you have to be on YouTube or Facebook or Instagram, suddenly you're seeing the conversations that are happening there. And maybe this is a good thing that congregations that have been a bit maybe isolated in the past will join into the mainstream dialogue a little bit more and begin to grapple with some of these topics.

Ben Tapper:

And what I'm wondering in a similar vein is now that congregations are seeing, at least some of them are seeing an uptick in the participation of youth and young adults, if that is going to drive this continued awareness for some social justice issues because on average, Millennials and Gen Zers are more engaged initiatives of social justice. So I wonder if just their mere presence and the desire to keep them engaged in community might continue to keep this awareness on the minds of certain congregations. It's hard to know how this will play out. 2020's been such a strange year, but these are things I think it makes sense to wonder about.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. And we've seen just a big generational gap and differences in how people think generationally and the center for a while now has been trying to access information and expertise about how do you make your congregation multi-generational? And maybe this is an opportunity for that that is as younger people get involved hopefully because of the digital nature of how congregations are moving, that we can get more of that intergenerational dialogue. And when you can add the strengths of each generation and learn to listen to one another, then some really positive things can happen.

Ben Tapper:

Yeah, I agree with that. So for me listening to Pastor Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes talk about transforming systems and then reflecting on the ways that I've been able to witness how different congregational systems have shifted firsthand, it really helped bring what Gabby was talking about home and it makes me hopeful. Having worked in congregational settings before, we always talk about changing a

congregation is like turning a cruise ship. It's going to happen. But it's going to be very painful and very slow. But 2020 has shown that doesn't always have to be the case. So my hope is that as people listen to this interview, they begin to reflect on the systems that have already changed within their context. But then wonder what it might take to apply some of that similar urgency to other systems that can be changed in the future.

Matt Burke:

Yeah, definitely. Yeah, and one of the other big threads that kind of make out in this conversation was about leader self-care. And so if this is your first foray into the Center for Congregations Podcast, I'd encourage you to take a look at episode three which was with Hillary McBride, our previous episode on mental health because she talks a little bit about that as well. But just the scope and scale of change that has happened, and the nature of everything that's happening in our culture requires that leaders take good care of themselves because if the leaders don't take care of themselves, then chances are it is not going to bode well for the congregation itself and the change that is still going to continue for some time to come.

Ben Tapper:

Yeah, absolutely.

Matt Burke:

So let's get into the interview. With us on this interview was Wendy McCormick. She's our Southwest director in the Evansville office, and she joined us to dialogue with Pastor Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes. So I think you'll find this interview really engaging. Pastor Gabby is very transparent and just a really wonderful personality, and we think you'll enjoy the conversation with her.

All right. So I want to welcome today Pastor Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes who is the co-founding pastor of Double Love Experience in Brooklyn, New York. Thanks for being here with us, Gabby.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Hey, Matt. Thanks for having me.

Matt Burke:

Absolutely. And we're excited to talk with you, and we're going to talk today about a lot of the changes that have happened resulting from the pandemic but what that can help us learn about change and about systems in the way that they change. And I think you're kind of in an interesting experience, Gabby, because your official launch for the congregation was in fall of '19. Is that right?

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Exactly. Yeah. We literally have at this point to date had more weekly services in the midst of a pandemic than not.

Matt Burke:

Wow.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

So in the way things fell, we got four months of weekly church. And it's so funny, as a new church, we were so excited about a building and excited to be gathered together. And then four months in, it's like, "Oh, actually, back to virtual." So yeah, it's been a fun ride.

Matt Burke:

Did you kick off initially as virtual, or did you kick... Because I know that you had some meetings in '18 and early '19.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah. Yeah. So what we did was, it's really interesting, we built our church to be digitally accessible from the beginning. As a matter of fact, when we were looking for buildings to move into, there was some buildings that were beautiful but didn't have reliable wifi or didn't have... Because in New York, some of the buildings are much older. So the war buildings, they can't get a wifi signal through. And we literally turned down some spaces that were aesthetically beautiful that would not have accommodated us well digitally or it would've cost us an arm and a leg to scale it up. So we've always known that, but that's largely because our audience is predominantly folks between their late 20s, early 30s. Then we've got some Gen Zers. So they're very wired to be connected online. So if we had launched a church that didn't have an online accessible way, we would have lost our target demographic.

So in 2018, we did a preview year for one year for worship services over the course of one year, and then every month we didn't have a service, we had small group dinners. And all of those services were livestreamed. And our very first worship service of our preview year, we had 400 people livestreaming and 100 people in the seats. We were like, "Okay. We're doing this right." So there's no way that we could ever go back after launching with that kind of engagement across the nation. And now, thank God, it has played to our benefit because the systems of the day require it. Yeah.

Wendy McCormick:

So you have a tremendous advantage because of the vision of how you started and the foundation you had. Obviously most congregations didn't have that recent history, but they had to figure it out. They've had to figure out how to get into the digital space. So now they're there, and they're either trying to do digital plus in person or they're looking to what it would be like to do digital plus in person. As a matter of fact, I just talked to a pastor this morning who said, "Hey, I told my leadership I can't physically do both. I can't physically do the recording and editing that I'm doing for the video service and in person the way we used to do it." So how are we going to rethink what it means to be doing both, not for crisis but forever? I wonder what you think about that.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah. I mean, it's really interesting. My experience has been the reverse where a lot of congregations have figured out how to do basically turn on a camera and stream whatever you're doing in the space. And the challenge during the pandemic for us and for a lot of congregations like us has been how do you make that experience more personal? Because what we realized was when people have the option to come in physically or not. They don't mind if the camera, if the pastor's not looking directly at them, and not having the direct experience with them. Because they're kind of like, "Well, I'm not there in person." It's kind of a little bit that comes with not being there.

But during the pandemic, we realized that even though we were digitally savvy, we had to shift how we shoot. And we had to come closer to the camera, and we had to truncate how long our service is. And we had to truncate how long our songs are, and really just make it more of a user-friendly experience. So much of what I've seen is the reverse.

But for those who scaled up during the pandemic and now they're trying to incorporate how to be this kind of hybrid experience, I think that you have more of an advantage than you realize because probably what you created in the midst of the pandemic is a much higher quality of what you would've created if you had just decided to go virtual while you were still meeting in person. And so my advice would be if there's a clergy person who is doing the recording, the editing, and they're going to be in physical space and they're concerned about having space for all of that, I would say find somebody to teach them how to do the editing you're doing. If you figured it out, somebody else can you. I promise you. If you learned how to do it in a span of however many weeks or months, somebody else can do that to.

So I will say this, when you go back in or if you're already back in, you definitely don't want to be doing both ends of that. But you can train somebody to. I don't think you should lessen the quality. You don't want to go backwards just because we're back together. You want to kind of have a plus experience. Like this plus that is our new experience.

Wendy McCormick:

Yeah. Yeah. And you know what that makes me think of, and I don't know what kind of other systems you address, but one of the other things that I'm hearing is that the systems of how we think about utilizing staff and volunteers are having to change as well. So in a modest sized congregation, the pastor and a part-time musician and maybe a volunteer that turned on the microphones in the morning were all that was needed. And now there need to be, in many cases, volunteers that are going to manage this tech. I love your point that if you as a seminary trained pastor figured this stuff out, somebody else can too.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah. Wendy, you're so right. And also, the limitations that we used to have when you only had a clergy person, a part-time musician, and a volunteer sound person. That has expanded. If you have a cousin who lives in another state who's willing to figure out how to edit your stuff, they don't even have to go to your church anymore. And I can tell you as someone who started a church, I have so much help. And not all of my help are people who would've been helping me when we were in physical services because they didn't live in New York.

Some of my help comes from people who don't even live in the city who have time, who want to help, who now finally are like... They've been asking me, "If there's anything I can do, let me know. If there's anything I can do, let me know." Now I'm like, "Actually, could you do X, Y, and Z for me?" So I would just say that too, even as you go back into your main space, whenever you're dealing with the virtual component of what you produce as a congregation. It does not always have to be somebody who's physically in your state or even in your church, and that may free you up to not overload the volunteers that you have.

Wendy McCormick:

Such a great suggestion. So many churches are excited about how many people they have tuning in who are not in their immediate location but involve those people. That's awesome.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

There are some congregations that are moving to a virtual membership option where people can not only join virtually but they can join certain ministries that happen solely on a virtual basis. So there are ways people can tithe online and tithe to your congregation. So if people feel connected to what you're doing, there are ways for them to also help lighten some of your load as you try to reimagine who are

you in 2020. 2020 has pushed us into so much innovation. But some of it doesn't have to be all bad. Some of it can be really helpful.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. If anybody out there's looking for an editor, my eight-year-old is currently editing his own Dude Perfect trick shot videos.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

There you go.

Matt Burke:

I keep telling him he needs to get a job.

Wendy McCormick:

We heard from a number of Indiana pastors that it's their 12-year-old kid that's helping figure it out.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah. Because you think about it, that's all they know. This is all they know. All of the systems that we're trying to learn and scrambling to learn, kids are like this is what they naturally do. So you'd be surprised. My nephews, I have three nephews, and my youngest nephew has always been a computer whiz, and sometimes he'll just be like, "Aunt Gabby, why are you doing that?" He won't say I'm doing it wrong. He'll just be like, "Why wouldn't you just do that?" And I'm like, "Thank you, Christopher. Could you teach me how to do that?" He's now 15, but at the time he's like 13 or 14. My 13- or 14-year old nephew, can you now tell me how to do it right?

So don't underestimate the resources, even in your household because they know what they're doing.

Matt Burke:

I just love the idea of you're thinking through what does it mean to not be geographically focused any longer. And even thinking about we're not only serving people at a distance, but then how do we involve those people in the volunteering of serving those who are distanced and essentially creating virtually communities, which is a relatively new thing, and we've all be forced into that. But what a wonderful and creative way of embracing this difficult time and saying, "Hey, we can actually do some good out of this."

Ben Tapper:

Gabby, as we're talking about what it means to transition, I'm aware that there's an emotional toll towards transitioning systems or pivoting systems that often goes unaddressed. So I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about the emotional toll, whether it be processing the grief that comes with the loss of a vision that you thought you could manifest or the courage it takes to step into a new vision that is suddenly thrust upon you. Either way, there's a lot of emotions that need to be processed when it comes to a transition. So can you just speak to the emotional work required to transition systems?

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah, Ben. Thank you for that question. It's been really hard, and sometimes you feel guilty for saying it's been hard because people are literally losing their lives. And it's like all I have to do is change a system. But it's been hard. I mean, I'll speak for us and any startup community, where we were so excited about some of the physical dimensions of being together and regularly being in space and being

able to hug and share laughs and vibe out with the band and read the energy of the congregation. And all of that in an instant went away. And that was definitely, you talk about grief. We definitely had to grieve what we thought we were building towards. We had spent a year and a half building a really dynamic system that we were really proud of. People were starting to get connected and to serve. We had just done an overnight retreat and people were coming back so energized. And then March 15th hits. Actually, March 8th for us, but then March 15th was the real no turning back day.

So yeah, there's definitely grieving what was, and there's also the kind of grief that comes with loneliness and isolation. So clergy already are typically overly stretched, typically doing a little bit too much. But then you've got your members going through a really hard time, and you're not physically able to be with them. That causes a certain kind of grief where church has always been the place where people run to when calamity and trauma happens. I mean, there may be a member you haven't seen in two years and then they have a bad six months, and you see them every week. And they're like, "Pastor, I need your help." And as clergy, we pride ourselves on being able to... I may not see you every week, but when you're going through, you know you can see me. You know you can stop by and I'm here. And we couldn't do that.

I had a volunteer team lead who had her first baby one week after the hospitals shut down where nobody could come in, and we had been prepping for that. I had individuals who lost loved ones where we had to do 10 person or less services at funeral homes and gravesides. That grief that comes along with not being able to... For many clergy, I think in the beginning we felt like we weren't being able to pastor well. Like how do I pastor my people through this really traumatic situation when my being with them is actually going to cause more harm than good? That was a huge kind of mental shift. It just upended everything that we were ever taught about what it means to be a good pastor.

But I would say to the emotional weight of changing systems, I think for myself, I had to allow myself to hold that grief. And that grief is still there to be honest. It hasn't gone away. But I've had to try to figure out what does it look like to be the church in this moment? What do people need? And we had to think through and troubleshoot a lot of different ways to be present online. Thankfully we had a digitally savvy community. I know not everyone has that story, but even for us, we had to figure out what platforms worked for which things. So what works for service versus what works for pastoral care hours versus what works for just check-ins and laughter. What works for music where you're not getting your service pulled down because you haven't paid copyright licenses because you never needed it before. Just all of those things.

And there's certainly an emotional strain. There's kind of a keeping up with the Jones' that happens because now you can see what everybody's doing at the same time, and you got about 30 seconds for people to decide if they're going to stay watching your service or hop to the next.

So yeah, I would just say I don't know that anyone has the answers yet, but I will say it's important to acknowledge that there is grief happening. That's probably still happening, and there's an emotional way of trying to serve your people well and push yourself towards innovation while not handicapping what your experience can be because you're trying to do so much that's so foreign from what you were that people don't recognize you anymore. And the weight of juggling all of that just... I don't know. I think everyone's still figuring that out.

Wendy McCormick:

It makes me think of a couple of things. The importance of self-care for clergy. I'm not sure many of the clergy that I talk with recognize how much harder they're working and how much emotional stress they're carrying that they don't typically carry. And even if they recognize themselves, I'm not sure that their people know.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah, their people probably don't.

Wendy McCormick:

Yeah. So there's that. But then there's also you talked a little bit about the grief in the congregation in terms of their own personal struggles. But there's also I would think in some congregations the grief of what has been lost of what we had of coming together. Even when we do come back together, it's not going to be exactly the same, right? So I wonder what kinds of things that's going to mean for pastoring a congregation through the it's not the same kind of grief and anxiety.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah. With us being in New York, I've had the misfortune of almost everyone in my congregation knowing someone personally who's been diagnosed and/or passed from COVID-19. And so, there was a point in my ministry of our church where I started to really lean more so into, "Hey, you survived this. Let's focus on that. Yes, everything else is different, but for some people, they did not survive this. And for some people, we know they did not survive this." So kind of looking at it if you had been in a war, if you come out of your home and everybody around you has past but somehow your house is still standing. You have the grief of what was, but you also have the awareness that, "Wow. It could've gone another way." That's a saying in our church. We'll shout off of that in a minute. It could've gone another way. It really could've been the case that we were fortunate enough to be standing in the midst of ashes and saying, "How do we rebuild?" We could've been the ones who couldn't rebuild.

So I think that for me it's important to hold the grief but to also hold some victory too. And in the midst of that victory, let's create some new possibilities. So if you take the kind of war example, after people have survived a war, community has survived a war, new systems naturally occur. And then you have to think about the cycles of life. Babies are still being born. Kids are still graduating high school and college or starting that. And they're starting with almost a new world order, a new sense of what is. So we have to also remember that while we have this memory of what things used to be, there's still people being born into this where this is going to be their normal. Where what we've experienced is going to be in the history books for them, and it's going to just be, "Oh yeah, the pandemic of 2020 caused this and caused that."

So I think we have to give ourselves space to realize that we're literally living through history and we're figuring it out. And unfortunately, the things we loved about what we used to have may not return, but what can happen as a result of this? Where are the possibilities that we never had before? While still grieving the limitations.

Wendy McCormick:

The word that comes to my mind when you talk is gratitude. So there's grief and there's gratitude.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah, yeah. And you're always I think going to be holding that. I mean, whenever you live through something traumatic, you learn coping mechanisms and you learn how to move past it. But you always hold a little bit of that trauma just because of how traumatic it was. And 2020 has been traumatic on many levels, and I think any of us who have been an adult in 2020 will hold that, regardless of what is to come.

Wendy McCormick:

I wonder, we may want to continue this a little bit, but I want to make sure that we come back to what you referred to of the different systems that you've come up with. I know you had something pretty innovative for pastoral care, and maybe there's some other systems that you could share with us for how you've been a digital pastor and also discovered some things that you'll carry forward.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yes. So definitely the pandemic has allowed us to really assess how we're connecting with people, and for us, again, because we really started very digitally heavy, we certainly had more followers and more engagement online than we had physically in a space. So one of the first things that we began to think through when it was clear that we were going to be in a socially distanced way for a while was to go back through those followers and really connect with them. So first thing we did was just very simple, just literally direct messaging. We have about 800 folks on Instagram. Direct messaging each person and just being like, "Hey, how are you? How's your family? Are you well? We know you may not be officially a member of Double Love, but as a friend of Double Love, we just want to know how you're doing." And we started calling everybody who had any type of digital connectivity to us, a friend of Double Love. Double Love is the name of my church.

And the reason why we did that was because we were still so new that our membership roster didn't match who was showing up. Everybody knows it takes a while for people to visit before they commit, if they commit. We're also in the era where membership is very different to people. If you ask somebody are they a member of my church, there's probably a lot of folks who will say yes who are not on paper members but who give, who show up regularly, who serve, who feel connected.

So we started just kind of leveling the playing field for anyone who was connected to us digitally to feel as connected as if they had signed a sheet of paper and become a member. And that's something that we will carry forward because we've realized that people... Their connection point is digital, and they want to feel cared for. And when we started to engage them in that way, I think they felt like, "Oh, okay. Well, I do have some people that are looking out for me, praying for me. That I can DM if our loved one's in the hospital or if somebody dies suddenly or if I'm just really going through a bout of depression and I just need to know there are other people who know I'm here." Those kind of things.

So yes, a little bit of sliding in DMs became pastoral care. And just checking on people, letting them know, especially in those early months of the pandemic where you could not go anywhere. Many people were working from home, and they didn't have very much connectivity.

That morphed into Zoom office hours, which is what we call it for pastoral office hours where literally we have the waiting room enabled. We have a certain number of hours on a Saturday every week that people know that my husband and I co-pastor. So we sit in the Zoom for two hours and it's completely open. We give everybody the information. And basically whoever gets there first we spend 20 or so minutes with them and leave everyone else in the waiting room and just rotate people in this virtual

waiting room. And there's a message in the waiting room that says, "Pastor Wilkes is with so-and-so. Please wait. Don't leave." Because we were trying to figure out how do we have private connectivity with our people? So we have the touchpoints of Wednesday prayer and Tuesday Bible study and Sunday service all online, but all of that is public facing. So we were looking for, in the same way that before the pandemic, you could schedule a meeting with your pastor or just stop by. We were trying to figure out how to model privacy. So we use Zoom in that way.

And then we use stuff like IG Live for game nights once we realized we're going to be in this pandemic for a while, and sharing the screen and playing... There's a card game we like called Black Card Revoked. Playing like little things like that that are just fun and allow people to laugh again. We did a karaoke, not karaoke. Well it kind of turned into karaoke but we did a cookout, a virtual cookout where folks were sharing screen and asking for their favorite song to be played and just trying to also remember that church is not just the moments of spiritual nuggets and rituals. But it's also the community. It's also the connectivity. It's also knowing that someone knows what's going on in my life, and we tried to mirror that as much as possible digitally. And all of those things we're committed to keeping even when we're finally able to be back together.

Wendy McCormick:

What occurs to me, even a congregation that didn't start out with the same digital vision and commitment that you guys did because of your demographic and because you were new, can learn a lot from this.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah. Just to be clear, let me not... Just to be clear, we had followers because we launched pages. And we posted on those pages. But all of this intentional connectivity, we were not doing. We had followers. We posted. If somebody commented, we commented back. That was it. So all of these kinds of things, just be encouraged someone. If you already have a social media page, that's basically what we had and we would go live every night now and again from the service. But yeah, all of these things we've created in the midst of the pandemic, and it has helped us to connect with people in ways that before it was pretty much passive engagement. They watched our page. They knew what we were up to because they happen to see it when they scrolled, but we weren't directly engaging them at all.

Wendy McCormick:

I love that distinction between passive, which is kind of the way we do worship even in person. We put it out there. Versus interactive. You're being really conscious about how to use the digital tools to be interactive and build relationship and community, which we want to be able to do going forward.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yes, absolutely.

Matt Burke:

So thinking about this, we're recording this in September of 2020. It's going to air in October of 2020, but somebody might be listening... Well, things might change between now and October, but somebody might be listening in December or even in '21. So what do you think we can learn about just we've dealt with so much dramatic change, but I think we can learn about change at a smaller scale and maybe change that doesn't come with such dire consequences. So Gabby, from your practitioner experience, what do you think congregations can learn about change and the way systems change through what we've encountered?

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

It doesn't take as long to change systems as we've always made it seem. If we had suggested the kinds of changes in congregations across the board, if you had suggested doing what I'm sure you've pulled off during this pandemic, I'm sure your trustee board or your congregation council or whoever you have that weighs in, would've been like, "It's going to take years to implement that. We can't do that right away." And what we've learned in this pandemic is that you can change in an instant if you need to. And everyone to some capacity has done it. I mean, there are 80- or 90-year old parishioners who are hopping on Zoom to go to service. People have learned. People have innovated. People have figured out where their resources lie within their congregations, where they need to outsource help in a very quick amount of time. Regardless of where you start your clock, it's been less than six months. And when you think about where we were six months ago as congregations across the board, if your congregation is still standing, you innovated something that probably would've taken you in your mind's eye two years in probably about two or three months.

So I would say don't lose that willingness to implement and take risks. I think one of the things that this time period has taught us that congregations can learn. They can kind of build the plane as they fly it in certain instances. There are some things that we may not know everything about it, but if you know enough to give it a shot, just walk your congregation through it. I think the congregations that have been the most successful are the ones where the clergy were really honest with the congregation. They were like, "Listen, we're going to try this for two weeks. And if it works, we're going to keep going. And if it doesn't, we're going to try something else. And give me your feedback about how this is feeling for you." Many of us had to start communicating in that way, which is honestly a much healthier way of engaging our congregations than what we're probably used to, which is we just kind of roll out this plan behind closed doors and people figure it out on the backend. And they have to go with it or not.

I think clergy became much more sensitive to the fact that people were being asked to change with them, and I think some of those types of best practices should absolutely continue past a crisis. We should absolutely be willing to say, "Hey, congregation. Let's try something new here. It may or may not work." And I bet you people will be excited to go with it.

There's also more we language that I've been hearing that needs to continue. You have parishioners who were like, "We are online. We are doing this. We are doing that." Because again, because the change happened so quickly, we needed everybody to do their part to get folks onboarded. So as a result, most congregants feel very connected to the change that has taken place. Some of them might've made suggestions that were heard that might not have been heard in other situations and conditions. And so as a result, people feel far more connected to what their congregations are doing at the change management level that you absolutely want to keep going when you're not in crisis.

Because if people feel like they're a part of it, then they're going to bring in their networks, and they're going to be really proud. And then even if it bombs and tanks, they're not going to be blaming the pastor or the congregational leader. They're going to be like, "Oh, we tried this, and it didn't work. I remember when our clergy person told us it may not work. Hey, pastor. Hey, rabbi. Guess this was that thing where it didn't work out." And people have this banter and almost like excitement about being a part of it as opposed to this sole leader who's making all the decisions and they're like in their peanut gallery like, "I don't know why we're doing it this way. This doesn't..."

So just lean into that I would say. Lean into the... I guess the three things I'm saying are that change does not have to take forever. Sometimes you got to just jump out there and try it. Lean into engaging your

congregations and letting them help you and letting them know what you're up to. And then lean into making space for bombing. If it doesn't work, your church is not going to close. Just try something else.

Wendy McCormick:

It strikes me that there's articles written, and seminars given on take risk, fail fast, blah, blah, blah. And we didn't really know how to do it, and that was a scary thing. And now you're saying, "Look, we did it. That's what we're doing. That's what we've learned how to do out of necessity."

The other thing I hear in what you're talking about is in the theoretical realm and people weren't sure how to do it. And it sounds like you're naming that they did, which is for leadership to be more authentic and transparent than may have been comfortable in the past. Can you say some more about that?

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah. I said this when I was speaking to a group a couple of months ago. In this time period, if you were not an authentic leader, people wouldn't follow you. If you were standing up in the midst of a pandemic acting as though we are not in dire straits and we're not in the time period you've never seen before, people will not trust you. I mean, it was just that dire in the beginning where you really had to be honest with your folks to a certain extent. I think my fear if I'm honest about us going back to "normal" or creating new normals is that a lot of clergy think they've figured it out now, and that's a really scary place. It's a scary place because nobody's figured it out. We're bracing ourselves for the fall and for the winter. We have no idea how this pandemic is going to play with the flu, how it's going to play with holiday travel, how it's going to play with all the things that we don't know yet.

And so I would just say to leaders, yes, pat yourself on the back that you made it through this time period. But remember that you probably made it through because you were probably more teachable. You were probably more willing to talk to different experts of public health or medical doctors or whoever you have in your sphere that are not clergy who help to guide you, governmental officials, what have you. And I would just caution us against thinking we've figured this thing out completely. We still need to be attuned to the fact there's so much that we don't know. The CDC doesn't know some things. There's just so much that we do not know about this pandemic. There are so many things that we've tried that have worked that we don't know if how we did it is why it worked or if it just kind of worked on a whim. We don't know.

So I think you've got to keep that level of authenticity to say we're moving with the information that we have. I think leadership is about being clear about the systems and the situations that you're in and making decisions that best monitor the information you have. But when new information comes, leaders need to pivot. And I've said this to a few other groups that I've spoken to. Don't be afraid to pivot. Don't be so locked into the fact that you figured out the pandemic. That you're afraid to reverse decisions or you're afraid to go back to... If you've already started meeting, you're afraid to go back social distancing because oh, what's the congregation going to think. I got to say you've got to be willing, and that's a part of authenticity. You've got to be willing to adjust as the new systems and the new information comes out because people's lives are still in our hands. People trust us. So when we make decisions, sometimes people turn off some of their reasoning because their pastor or their rabbi or their momma, whoever said it.

And so we still need to authentically be connected to the fact that we don't know everything. For real, we don't. Sometimes we say that and we're trying to be cute, but we think we do. But no, in the

pandemic, we really don't know everything. And so holding onto some of that authenticity I think is what will allow people to trust us and will allow us to go much further in a healthy way, not even just emotionally healthy. In an actual, literal, physical healthy way.

Wendy McCormick:

So you know Gabby, and we're hearing from clergy leaders that some of them or many of them are working harder than they ever have before trying to do what they were used to doing, which was already a lot, and then adding all this new stuff, new learning curve, grief management, anxiety, all of these things. And self-care has always been a challenge for many clergy. Now maybe in particular ways. Can you talk about what you've learned about that?

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah. Absolutely. I think it's important to name that clergy have become not just clergy, but they've also become producer, director, social media, digital engagement, strategists, things become casting directors trying to figure out who's going to be in front of the screen. I mean, clergy have really taken on additional jobs, and it's important to name that the original jobs still matter. So they're still expected to respond if people are sick, if they're dying, if they are in need. And then they still got to write relevant sermons and relevant Bible studies. It's a lot.

I just want to name for any clergy that feels burned out and they may feel like, "Well, maybe I'm not doing this right." Honestly, this has been a season of intense burn out for everyone I know who's doing this well. And sometimes it's just helpful to name that. That this climate has caused many of us to have less sleep, to try to figure out where our health is. Some of that help helps for a little bit and then they get burned out and they got to go back to their regular lives and their regular jobs. I know for myself, a lot of the help that I had in the top part of the pandemic, they're now having to lessen what they do because their work lives are coming back into normalcy. So there was a time period where in my setting, people had more time because their jobs were figuring all this out. So they were willing to help, and now they're almost overloaded because people have moved into this 10 Zoom calls a day, always accessible experience.

So I want to name that this is a season of intensity for any clergy, and I don't know when that's going to change because in addition to all the things I already named, we're also called to kind of reinterpret the times to know when can we come back together, when shouldn't we, do we need to shift that, what's happening.

So what I would say in terms of self-care for myself, self-care looked like trying to figure out what day I could have off again because for most of us the days off that we had have now become production days or taping days or team meeting days or what have you. And even though "Sunday" might be off for those that prerecord, it's really not because you got to still be present to engage what's happening so people don't feel like "you're off".

So what I would offer is by way of self-care is to find if you can still one day a week where you're not doing this work and just build your production schedule around that, and also, this is almost more important, try to really have a work day that people understand that you honor even if it's from your living room. What I mean by that is have a time that you stop responding to crisis emails. For me it's 10:00 PM because I'm in New York and people are just night owls. So 10 is early for a lot of people, but that's the time period where if you send it to me after 10, you're not going to get a response until the next day. That's self-care for me.

So I just want to name that self-care looks very different, especially when it's still travel is iffy. If you do travel, you got to quarantine and all the things that we might've done, spas are closed, and all those kinds of things that might've helped you rejuvenate are very different right now. So a lot of it is going to be how you look at your own calendar and give yourself some space to just exhale. I started bike riding. That's socially distanced, and it's outdoors. And it gives me fresh air. Outdoor restaurants, I do that now. I try to remain safe, but I recognize that I need from people-to-people connectivity that's not related to work. But this is a hard season, and if we said it wasn't, we'd be lying to you.

Matt Burke:

All right. So as we round out our time together, Gabby, we are dealing with so much stress, grief, change, so many things happening in our culture. I just think it's a good time to think about encouragement. So what encouragement would you give to congregational leaders, pastors, lay leaders, or even people who are just part of a congregation listening to this podcast? What are some bright spots or hope that you see?

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah. I would say to be completely honest, my bright spot that I offer to everyone is that you are functioning in the midst of a pandemic, a global health crisis that is literally killing and taking the lives of individuals every day. You're still alive. Your institution is still alive, which was not a given six months ago. You're still present. You're still here. So I think that while that might sound trite, it's really true. And if you lean into everything that's happening in our headlines, the fact that you're still able to think clearly and think innovatively and to serve your people well and the fact that your people still have a place they can come to at least once a week where they're getting an encouraging word from you, where they're getting some sort of community and some degree of normalcy, you've accomplished an amazing feat.

And so it's going to be hard. I'm speaking as someone who's also doing it. It's hard. Every week I'm exhausted, but just remember that these are not normal times. So whatever wins you're getting in this season, they count even more because you had to work a lot harder to get them. So just keep reminding yourself that you're not producing in a normal time. You're producing in a really intense time where literally something is trying to kill you every day.

There's a poem by Lucille Clifton where she says, "Come celebrate with me that every day something has tried to kill me and it failed." You literally every day... Every day you wake up and do your work, you are surviving, and you are beating the steps and the odds. And you're not only surviving as an individual but your organization, your congregation is also surviving. And that is enough encouragement to keep yourself going day to day. To know that at some point this is going to be in the history books, and we're going to look at how we made it over. And we're going to be really proud of what we've done.

Matt Burke:

Absolutely. Thank you so much for that. So Gabby, where can people follow you and your work?

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Yeah. So they can follow me. I am an Instagram girl. I love Instagram. So I'm on Instagram @PastorGabbyCWilkes. And my church, you can follow my church as well. We're on Instagram @DoubleLoveExperience. And then I'm on Twitter @GabbyCWilkes. So come see me online. I'm on

Facebook. But Facebook, you don't really follow people on Facebook. But you can look for my name if you want to find me on Facebook. But I have the most fun on Instagram.

Matt Burke:

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for your time today, and thank you for sharing your expertise as a practitioner, and we really just appreciate you and who you are and your work.

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes:

Thanks for having me, guys.

Ben Tapper:

That was Pastor Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes of the Double Love Experience. Up next, resources.

All right. Let's jump right into our resources. We had a very rich interview with Pastor Gabby, and I know that out of that is going to come some great resources. So I'll jump in and I'll kick it over to you, Matt.

The first resource that I'm bringing today is a book actually, and I know that everyone is just so thrilled to learn about another book they need to read. I get it. However, this book is topical in that it talks about transitions. The title of the book is called *Managing Transitions*, and it is the 25th anniversary addition. So if that makes you feel special, it should. This book is written by William Bridges and Susan Bridges. They're co-authors, and it's a book that's more formulated for the business world. But it talks about addressing situational shifts, which as many of you know our congregations are going through right now. So even though it's designed more for the corporate world in some ways, it has some helpful tidbits in terms of differentiating between change and transition and just ways that we can orient ourselves or our leaders can orient themselves as they approach transitions for their communities that can be fruitful for any congregation in the midst of change or in the midst of transforming or turning systems.

So once again, it's called *Managing Transitions: The 25th Anniversary Edition, Making The Most of Change*. And the authors are William and Susan Bridges.

All right, Matt, what you got today?

Matt Burke:

Yeah. Thanks for that, Ben. So I've got a Karl Vaters twofer, and I feel like I've already talked about Karl in another podcast. I'm just really a big fan of this guy, but these resources are honestly very, very relevant for what's happening right now. So the first one is just his website. So karlvaters.com. And then he's got a part of that website called Spark, which is small church pastors adapt and recover kit where he's featuring blog posts and articles specifically related to how do we adapt and recover because of the issues and the transitions happening during the pandemic.

And one of the reasons that I like Karl Vaters so much is he is a small church practitioner. He's a small church pastor in Orange County, California. You can read his entrée into how he wanted to be a resource for small congregations, but he definitely is a person that if you are a small congregation, and really that means probably under 250, he has a lot to say specifically to you. I mean, kind of one of his frustrations was he would go to conferences and so much of the information was really about large churches where they're saying, "So your communication's team," and then the small church people are looking around and being like, "Yeah, so that's me." But just realizing that small churches have about a third of what they need is very different. So his heart is really about small congregations.

He does come from a Christian tradition. So if that's not your tradition, that's okay. I still think a lot of what he has to say will be very relevant to you because it really is about a small communities and small congregations in general.

So definitely check out karlvaters.com, and then the Spark, the small church pastors adapt and recover kit.

And the other resource from Karl is a book he actually pushed out very quickly at the front end of the pandemic called *The Church Recovery Guide: How Your Congregation Can Adapt and Thrive After a Crisis*. So it's very much focused on look, we are all experiencing major crisis right now. How do we survive through this? How do we adapt? How do we thrive through it and come out the other side? So it's a very digestible book. So as Ben alluded to, sometimes as congregational leaders, I'm sure you have shelves and shelves full of books. Some of which you maybe haven't read. I'm in the same boat. But this one would be worthwhile, especially because it's very timely and it is also not a lengthy book. And it is also not an academic book but very much practically based. And I think you'll find it really interesting.

So Ben, I think you had another one, right?

Ben Tapper:

I did. And you know that because you sent me this article. Hey. And I'm glad you did because it is right up my alley. The second resource I'm bringing is an article called *Your Surge Capacity Is Depleted, It's Why You Feel Awful*. Here's how to pull yourself out of despair and live your life. This is an article written by Tara Haley, and it deals with this, what the second part of Gabby's interview dealt with, which is pastoral care and self-care. In it the author talks about thriving in intense situations when others might feel depleted or shrink back. She and her partner kind of embraced the situations and they do well in high stress and high intensity situations. However, since we've all been living in high stress situations since roughly early to mid-March, at some point as human beings, we get overloaded and that's what this article is about. It's just helping people recognize that even if you are one of those folks that does well in high stress situations, at some point you've probably reached your limit. So here's how to know if you've reached your limit. And then here are some things that you can do if indeed you are kind of running on E and have crossed over and maxed out your limit.

What I want to say is that this article stood out to me because of something that Gabby said when she was addressing what it means to deal with the emotional toll of transforming a system or going through a transition. And it's something that I don't think we think about often enough because many of us haven't had the time to sit still and really even process half of our emotions. But this article, as I read through it, I felt like it named some of what I was feeling, and then I really appreciate the helpful tidbits at the end that helped me reframe how to approach some of the ways I'm thinking and some of the ways that I'm processing these emotions.

So if you're a pastoral leader, a congregational leader or just someone with a lot on your plate, I think you might feel seen as you read through this, and you might find some of the recommendations near the end of it at least helpful or thought provoking.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. And full transparency, that resource was actually discovered by Wendy McCormick who you all heard on the interview. So there's teamwork. Wendy sent it to me, and I passed it to Ben.

Ben Tapper:

Teamwork makes the dream work.

Matt Burke:

Yup. So please know that there are so many resources. When I started doing a little bit of researching on resources around change, a system's change, transition, the interview with Gabby touched on a lot of things. And the world of resources is huge, and we understand that that's problematic. I mean, you go to Google, you put something in, and you get hundreds of thousands, if not hundreds of millions of hits. That's where we can be helpful. So remember that we've got the CRG, the Congregational Resource Guide. So T-H-E-C-R-G dot org, and that'll be in the show notes.

The links to all of these resources, we'll actually put a collection together on the CRG. But the CRG are some of the resources that we found over the last 20 years that we think are some of the best and specifically related to congregations. So we really find that helpful, and also you can contact us on that website. So you can just get involved in a chat with one of our consultants, and we can help customize. Because chances are you need a very specific and custom approach to how you're dealing with change in your congregation or how you're dealing with self-care, and we're happy to help with that. And if you're an Indiana congregation, you can reach out to one of us directly through one of our offices. So we encourage you to do that because that's one of the reasons we're here is to help you sift through the world of resources to really find what's relevant specifically for your congregation.

Ben Tapper:

Yeah. And we recognize how challenging these times have been for everybody but especially those involved in congregational life or congregational leaders. So whether you're dealing with the overwhelm of trying to wrap your mind around an institutional shift or transition or you're still trying to process your own emotional grief and reaction to everything that has been happening throughout this calendar year, we see you, we feel you, we understand what that feels like. And we're bringing that empathy into the work, into the resources that we're bringing and into any interactions that we're having with leaders. And that's why we really appreciated having Pastor Wilkes on here because we feel like she can speak to that and that she did speak to that authentically and empathically.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. Absolutely. And remember that the Center for Congregations, we exist because your work matters, you matter, your congregation matters, and your community. And we want to be here to serve you. And that's genuinely why we exist. So please reach out, let us know how we can help. We would be thrilled to learn more about your congregation and find ways that we can serve you better.

Ben Tapper:

Absolutely.

If you are interested in learning more about us but don't necessarily want to take that step in contacting us, you can always find us on Facebook and Instagram at The Center for Congregations. We post resources on there. We post congregational stories and information about upcoming events. That's a good way to keep tabs on what we're doing and to learn more about who we are.

Matt Burke:

Yeah, and if you want to reach out to Ben and I directly, you can email podcast@centerforcongregations.org. If you have ideas for upcoming shows or maybe even resources

that you want to share with us about some of the topics we covered today, we would absolutely love to hear from you.

Ben Tapper:

Yeah. Thank you all once again for taking the time to join us in this conversation and for listening to this work that we're putting out here.

Once again, thank you everyone for joining us this week for this conversation and this interview. We really hope that you appreciated it. And if you did, we encourage you to take a moment to leave us a five-star rating and a review. That is the fastest way for new listeners to find this content and to find this podcast. And if you like us, believe that this is a service to people, if you believe there's value in what we're doing, then take a moment to leave us a five-star rating and review so others can find this valuable work. We hope that you will join us for our next episode, and until then, that you take care of yourselves and each other.