

ABC Radio National – God Forbid program

Leading with love: women are taking the Church into the future

[TRANSCRIPT]

James Carleton [host]:

Breaking Barriers or Breaking Faith? The role of women in religion has been contested ground for centuries, and the debate is far from over.

Hi, I'm James Carleton. Welcome to God Forbid on Radio National and ABC Listen, and across the Pacific. On ABC Radio Australia, it's the panel show about the things we believe and why we believe them. And in Australia and beyond, women are taking on religious leadership in ways that would have been unthinkable decades ago.

But change and faith is a complex brew, and with every breakthrough, there's a backlash. And the arguments aren't just theological, they're personal too, touching on tradition and culture, and what it means to be faithful in the 21st century. So, what happens when the drive for gender equality meets the weight of sacred tradition?

Let's find out with our God Forbid panel. With us is Pastor Sue Westhorp, who was one of two women ordained for the first time into the Lutheran Church of Australia, and Reverend Charissa Suli, President of the Uniting Church of Australia, the youngest and first person of colour to hold that office. Well, Charissa, welcome to God Forbid!

Charissa Suli:

Thank you. It's great to be here with you.

Host:

So, did you think you would be here with us when you were a little girl and told you couldn't be a minister?

Charissa Suli:

I had absolutely no clue. Never dreamt that I would be sitting in this chair right now.

Host: But you want to be...

Charissa Suli: Even talking to you. (laughs)

Host: I'm sure it's not the highlight of the career so far. But you wanted to be a beautician when you were a girl.

Charissa Suli: I did. It was all about beauty, you know, the outside. And I just love making people feel good. So that's what it was for me.

Host: Well, that's not inconsistent with pastoral work.

Charissa Suli: Yeah. I guess I soon discovered that actually the outer beauty is not what matters. It's actually what's in the heart.

Host: Yeah. And what about the idea that that's a man's job, to find the inner beauty via the Church, the body of Christ?

Charissa Suli: It is not a man's job. It is everyone's job. And women have, you know, every right to be able to offer leadership in that space.

Host: But what has it meant practically for you, especially as a Tongan-Australian woman, growing up in a community where Christianity is so vibrant and inseparable from the identity of people?

Charissa Suli: For me, you know, I've always grown up seeing Pacific Islander men, like I grew up as strong Methodist, right, and it has always been men leading from the front. And it was actually another Pacific Islander woman ordained within the Uniting Church that for the first time, I saw her leading from the front that inspired me and realised, 'Oh, wow. I look like her. She's a minister.

Wait, she's a Reverend Doctor. Like she's a lecturer, a professor as well'.

And that was new for me at that time. But I'm also, you know, a mother, a mother of four children. I'm also a grandmother. New grandmother, new title.

And so for me, I think, although I sit in this particular office as President, women have always been at the forefront of juggling multiple roles and hats within community and families and society. So, it's not a new thing, but I think it does feel like a historical moment because of where our Church is at.

Host:

And just to talk about the Church, I suppose politics is the word. You mentioned so many Methodist Tongan Australians. Is that because the Methodist Church became part of the Uniting Church when it formed, and when Pacifica communities, Tongan communities came here, they came from the Methodist Church in Tonga, and therefore the Uniting Church was a natural home in this country?

Charissa Suli:

Yes, right. And there's always been an ongoing relationship with our Pacific partners or Pacific communities anyway, or the Pacific Islands. So, there has been a long-standing relationship even before the inception of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Host:

Well, let's turn to our Melbourne studio where we have Pastor Sue Westhorp. Hello, Sue.

Sue Westhorp:

Hello, how are you?

Host:

I'm very well. You were ordained into the Lutheran Church just in April. How significant is that for your denomination?

Sue Westhorp:

It's incredibly significant. We've had three ordinations in the past few months since the Synod decision in

October last year to ordain women as well as men. This has been a long time coming. It's been a number of Synods. I think this was the sixth vote and incredibly significant for our denomination and for those of us who've longed to fulfil the call but have had to wait a long time.

Host: So were you at that Synod?

Sue Westhorp: I was actually, yes, and it was an amazing experience.

Host: Did you have a vote?

Sue Westhorp: I did have a vote, yeah. It's the first time I'd actually been there as a delegate.

Host: Did you vote for or against your ordination?

Sue Westhorp: Oh, I don't think I'm allowed to tell you how I voted.

Host: No, it's a secret ballot.

Sue Westhorp: Yeah, that's right. I think you can probably guess.

Host: So you were one of the 269 who voted 'yes', but not one of the 108 who voted 'no'. So, tell me about that. Is it like rancorous, like an ALP conference?

Sue Westhorp: No, it was actually conducted in a really gracious spirit, I have to say. People were allowed to come to the microphone and speak, and then the vote itself was done electronically. So, that actually added a layer of privacy, I think, for people.

All surrounded in prayer as well. But it was the first time that we had a vote that enabled two practices to occur in the Church. One which is the ordination of

men and women, and one which is the ordination of just men.

And so you can hold to either of those views and still exist as part of the Church.

And this has been something religious traditions across denominations and faiths have been doing as they collide with, I don't want to say modernity, but certainly the cultural touch point issues of our time. It's like we can't resolve these debates to everyone's satisfaction, be it same-sex marriage, be it the ordination of women, but I could mention others. So, a lot of Churches, a lot of denominations, a lot of traditions say we'll respect both and have a two-stream path, one which acknowledges the tradition, one which adopts the change.

Host: Is that right?

Sue Westhorp: Yeah, and that's what we've come up with. And I think to respect people's consciences is the term that's used about what they understand Scripture to say in this area.

Host: Is that because if those consciences weren't respected, it would lead to a split in the Church?

Sue Westhorp: I think that's certainly maybe where we were heading, if this couldn't be resolved. Yeah, it's very difficult to coexist when something so major is a difference between people. And I guess the urge and the striving for unity within the Church has enabled this process to happen over the past 18 months. It's been an 18-month process.

Host: It's interesting that you call it the strive for unity. So, the strive for unity amid the irreconcilable difference.

Sue Westthorp: Yes, yes. And I guess getting back to basics, knowing that we're all one in Christ, we are Christ's body together, and that we work better together than apart. And, so, this is what we're trying, and this is what we're praying will succeed.

Host: And Sue, tell me about your background, your Lutheran. Does that mean you come from a Lutheran family and have German ancestry?

Sue Westthorp: Yes, I do have German ancestry. Yes. Born into a Lutheran family, I haven't really known anything else. Born into a musical family, so always involved in music and liturgy within the Church as well, which I think what kept me in the Church to begin with.

Host: So, how are Lutherans different from other Christians, and what would your, say, grandmother have made out, have thought, had she known her granddaughter would be a minister, a Lutheran minister?

Sue Westthorp: I'm not quite sure what my grandmother would have said, but I know that my grandfather would have been very pleased. It was something he supported.

Host: And what makes Lutherans different from other Christians?

Sue Westthorp: Well, I guess there's not a whole lot of difference as I look at us all together. We came from, obviously, from the Catholic Church during the Reformation. But the emphasis on grace, that's a big one for Lutherans.

Host: And what does that word mean for you?

Sue Westthorp: Ah, grace.

Host: It used to be just a nice girl's name.

Sue Westthorp: Yeah, it still is a nice girl's name.

Host: Sorry, Grace, if you're listening.

Sue Westthorp: I think grace for me means there is nothing that I can do to earn anything here. I am just loved unconditionally, as I am, as I was created to be.

Host: Well, Charissa, tell me about your family background, Your parents, Tongan born, yeah?

Charissa Suli: Yes, both of them Tongan born.

Host: And what do they think of having an ordained daughter?

Charissa Suli: My father passed away over 20 years ago, but I know he would be so proud of me anyway. And my mum's really proud. And I think because they've always seen women in leadership. So, it's not as if it's a new idea, a new concept, but to then go through the process of ordination, fully supportive.

Host: And it's been a rocky journey for you, hasn't it?

Charissa Suli: Yeah.

Host: You were a mum as a teenager, and that brought what, stigma?

Charissa Suli: Definitely. It brought a lot of stigma and, you know, being shunned by society. And even to a point where you got a lot, I received a lot of judgment during that time, not only from wider society, but at that time, the Christian Church I was part of, it wasn't the Uniting Church, but definitely felt the exclusion.

Host: You could feel the eyes on you?

Charissa Suli: Oh, most definitely. Yeah, most definitely.

Host: How has that shaped your practice of faith?

Charissa Suli: For me, it's funny. It's not until later on in life, you realise how past experiences definitely shaped your approach to leadership. It's definitely deepened my own spirituality and understanding of God. And ensuring that everyone feels they belong and are welcome, and not only in words, but also in the practice of ministry, because I know what it's like to be excluded. I know what it's like to be shunned, you know, from a Church that you love, and even just wider society. So, when I think about who God is, God's inclusive love, the way I lead my faith and even talk about my faith, I know should not reflect a place of exclusion for anyone.

Host: And yet the Church, and Church men and women can be the first to exclude, not the last.

Charissa Suli: I wouldn't say just the Church, I'd say it's broad – it's human beings in general, I think regardless of faith or no faith.

Host: You think it's an innate part of us?

Charissa Suli: I think it's part of humanity because until people actually begin to see that their humanity is tied up in the other person's humanity, then I think people will begin to be a bit more gracious and understanding and actually get to know the person before making judgement.

Host: Well, things are getting worse, not better on that score, aren't they?

Charissa Suli: It depends where you're looking, but I mean, we do live in a broken world. You just have to look at the global world we live in and we see a lot of the wars.

Host: I mean, you only need to go to social media as well as war. I mean, it's everywhere. The assumption of bad faith, the mistrust at a foundational level.

And do you think the Church is relevant in the 21st century in making that situation better or at least not worse?

Charissa Suli: Most definitely. The Church has good news to share in today's society. The message of the Church is about being a resurrected people. It's about new life. It's about light shining in the darkness. It's about love and grace and hope. And it's a message that counters the negative and broken messages that we're hearing in society today or in the world.

Host: Do you see that as a sort of secular philosophical Christian message that should be spread amongst all people? Or is that a sort of resurrectional message to Christians to be saved?

Charissa Suli: I actually think it's a spiritual message. And when I say spiritual, it's actually about something that is much higher than any human being or force in today's society because I'm talking about a God who is divine.

Other people relate to God as the universe or the light. But I believe there's a spiritual message because it's hope. It counters that negative voice that we hear in society today.

Host: It sounds like what you're painting that is a God that is big enough to be worthy of the name. But if I want to

put it this way, small enough to be accessible by anyone. You call it, whether you want to call it the universe or creation or love.

Maybe that conception of what is divine or what is beautiful beyond our reckoning is open to people who say, don't go in for the superstition of religion, but do go in for the grace, peace and transcendence that you promise.

Charissa Suli:

Well, I actually think people would be surprised at what they discover when they begin the journey of actually getting to know this God, the God that I worship, the God that I believe in.

Host:

But you're using the 'G' word again. And that's going to turn people off, God.

Charissa Suli:

I disagree with you. I actually think once you begin to have a conversation with people and begin to actually focus on how you're responding to people, because often when I'm out and about and connecting with people, I don't start with God, but I start with the values of Jesus Christ.

Host:

Well, Sue.

Sue Westhorp:

Yes.

Host:

What do you say about this challenge of getting the message right and accessible, and yet true to its tradition?

Sue Westhorp:

Yeah, I agree with Charissa. I think that the hope that Christianity brings is an amazing thing, but it's not a Pollyanna kind-of-hope. It's grounded in suffering. And I think perhaps sometimes, well, not perhaps, I think that people need to hear that message that in their suffering, God walks with them. God is there and God

knows suffering. So, hope comes out of that, but it's a presence as well. It's an embodied presence, God with us, who understands what we're going through. I wonder in this day and age of social media and all the negative messages, people are often isolated and suffering, whether that's actually what they need to hear – that God is with them and understands.

Host: And this question about 'God' being a word that invites or repels?

Sue Westhorp: Yeah, I think language is important, but I also think it's important not to shy away from the terms we want to use, and that we've used for years, centuries, about who the divine is, that we name 'God'. Perhaps inviting people into an exploration of conversation about what that means to them is a good way to get into it, rather than just saying, this is the word and this is what we're going to use.

Host: Charissa, the Uniting Church was formed in 1977, am I right, and ordained women from the beginning?

Charissa Suli: Yes, that's correct.

Host: So, why such different approaches to women's ordination between and across denominations?

Charissa Suli: What do you mean different approaches?

Host: Like obviously the Roman Catholic Church.

Charissa Suli: Oh, right, for others.

Host: Excludes women from the priesthood, the Lutheran Church has tried five times and only successful on the fifth time to ordain women.

Charissa Suli:

Yeah. For me, I believe all denominations are on their own journey. And so, the Uniting Church has been on the journey of recognising women in leadership and the ordination of women way before Union.

I know the very first woman was ordained in the Methodist Church in 1927. So, way before. So, we're quite fortunate in the sense that when the three traditions came into Union, ordination of women was already accepted and celebrated.

Host:

And the three traditions being?

Charissa Suli:

Methodism, Presbyterian and the Congregational Tradition or Church.

Host:

And tell me about, is it called the Association of Confessing Congregations in the Uniting Churches?

Charissa Suli:

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations.

Host:

Ah, yes. This is like a group of conservative Uniting Churches who meet on their own.

Charissa Suli:

They were formed in 2006. You know, they would say that they are an evangelical group within the Uniting Church, but they ceased operations in 2023.

Host:

Is that because they left the Church or...?

Charissa Suli:

I believe they then decided to take their own journey, is what I'm going to say, because the Uniting Church has never excluded or turned anyone away that had their own beliefs or had a different opinion to some of the decisions and commitments the Uniting Church has made. For in their own right, they decided to cease.

Host: And can Churches, in this day and age, afford to lose members like that with the people attending Church, you know, old and getting older, small and getting smaller?

Charissa Suli: You know, I often hear the term, 'all the Church is dying', but I would push back and say, 'where are you looking?'. Because when I looked at our migrant communities, they are bursting through, you know, the seams, the church buildings are way too small. They have people of all ages.

There is a certain demographic that is aging, but like that is the journey of life, right?

Host: It's extraordinary how the Church used to say things like, 'how are we going to welcome migrant communities?'. Now the Pacifica contribution to the Uniting Church, the Korean-Australian contribution, it's so profound, it's impossible to think of the Church without them. They are the mainstay of practice and faith in this country.

Charissa Suli: And I think with the increase of migration too, you just have to look also at social issues such as climate change. When you look at the island of Tuvalu, right, our Australian government has an agreement about migration for them, here in Australia, so this will continue to be a pattern in terms of increase of migration. So, how do Christian Churches – whether it's Uniting Church or not – how do we continue to be a place of welcome for people who are then having to adopt a new identity and try and find a home when they're moving from a small island to a big city in Australia?

Host: And the Church has an important role to play there?

Charissa Suli: A hundred percent. I think all Churches do. Not only thinking about those Pacific islands who are going

underwater, our Government also has the seasonal workers program, and they are getting a lot of their workers who are working here in Australia to build our economy from the Pacific islands. And so again, how do we also welcome those who have left their home to help establish a country like Australia and to help us? You know, working in agriculture and farms as well.

Host: And Susan, what does it mean for you to say the Church is the body of Christ and the ordination of women therefore sort of fundamentally changes the nature of Christianity?

Sue Westhorp: That's a pretty big question, isn't it?

Host: That's a good one, isn't it?

Sue Westhorp: (Laughs) Well, the body of Christ needs to reflect humanity. And so now that we ordain women, I think our leadership reflects God's image, men and women together. If I think, for example, the Sunday after I was ordained, going back into my congregation and being able to look at young girls and say to them, 'You know, you can actually now pursue your call. If God calls you, there's nothing stopping you'. So, to know that the body of Christ can now expand in ways that perhaps it couldn't before, because people feel like they might be accepted and not rejected.

One of the things that I noticed at my ordination service was the number of people who turned up who haven't been at a Church for a long, long time. This is the start of perhaps their journey back into, back into the Church, to know that God loves them and accepts them as they are.

Host: It sounds like you felt the role of role model keenly when those young girls were looking up at you. You were also taking serious your mentorship, looking down at them.

Sue Westhorp:

Absolutely. I think ordination comes with a responsibility now. And that's probably the word that describes how my experience has changed in ministry. I feel a certain responsibility now, but certainly towards the next generation of people who will come through, making sure that we iron some of the wrinkles out in the process that we've, that have occurred over the last six months as the first ordinations have happened. But also to provide, we've been in, and you would probably understand this too, Charissa, I imagine, when you're battling things and battling institutions, you're in that fight mode all the time, just to be able to claim that you have a call from God, to make an environment now where women don't have to fight, but can actually relax into following their call. It feels like a big responsibility, but such a gift as well.

And I had no role models within my own denomination. It was only when I went into hospital chaplaincy and had role models of ordained women from other denominations, that I began to see what I could be and what my call was. And, as they say, you can't be what you can't see. And I take that very seriously now.

Charissa Suli:

Most definitely.

Host:

No pressure.

Sue Westhorp:

I didn't say I have to be the best at it. (laughs)

Host:

On Radio National, this is God Forbid. I'm James Carleton. We're also on ABC Listen and across the Pacific on Radio Australia.

We're talking women in religious leadership and our special guests, Sue Westhorp and Charissa Suli.

Change in religious communities doesn't happen overnight. It happens across generations at times. So, what are we really looking at here? A fundamental shift

in how religious authority works, or maybe just adjustment at the edges. And as younger generations grow up seeing women in pulpits and boardrooms, how might that reshape faith itself?

Well, Charissa, looking at the younger generation of Christians, do you see different attitudes towards women in leadership roles compared to older generations?

Charissa Suli:

I do see a difference, and I can only speak from my own experience. Like even now, I'll walk into a room and I'll be the guest speaker or preaching, or whatever it might be, and it's still turning heads. Like, well, she's the minister, like she's preaching.

Even though for us, it's since 1927 since the first woman was ordained in the Methodist Church. Well, my experience has been people are warm, they're welcoming, young generations are like, 'wow, she's talking about God'. And speaking a message that they can relate to, like going back to what you said earlier about the message and I think for me, people are feeling like they can relate to God who actually welcomes them as they are, particularly when you know I've often heard young people say, 'nah, I'm not going to Church yet because my life is not right. Yeah, I've got to get perfect'. But then when they hear a message that, you know, come with your brokenness, like really, I can come. You know, I don't have to go through so many steps. Like they can just come as they are and begin to explore their own faith.

But as Sue had mentioned earlier, there's still challenges though, you know, for women in ministry. I still face challenges today as a woman, and I think too the other...

Host:

But you're the President, you're the boss.

Charissa Suli: I don't know about boss, but yeah, I'm the President.
(laughs)

Host: If someone's rude, just excommunicate them. Smite them.

Charissa Suli: (Laughs) It doesn't work that way.

Host: It does.

Charissa Suli: (Laughs)

Host: There are passages which you can...

Charissa Suli: I could bring out in. But I think too, like, I'm also trying to normalise, regardless of your gender, it's okay – like, we can lead. I'm also trying to normalise that I am a working mother. Why is it an issue?

Host: What do your four kids and their friends think about...

Charissa Suli: They love it. They cannot believe it. That I'm an ordained minister, first of all, and then to now hear that I'm the President, you know, of a denomination. Like, that's so cool.

I'm quite fortunate, too, that I do have a supportive husband. He's Tongan as well. And when you've grown up in a community and a culture that Tongan men lead, head of the family, and have my husband support myself in my own ministry role, he plays a huge role in giving me space to go and lead.

Host: Did that require a journey from him?

Charissa Suli: A journey for all, for my husband and my children. And this was when I felt the call from God to go into ordained ministry. I then made it about the whole

family. We're taking this journey together. And what I mean by that was I would sit down with my kids and talk to them. This is some of the changes that would happen. How are you feeling about it? And that has actually been fruitful for me because they have been so supportive, and have been the backbone, really, of giving me space to do what I can do in this time.

Host:

And Sue, motherhood and religious leadership, it does seem to be a particular flashpoint.

Sue Westhorp:

It does, doesn't it? All those things that the Church is now going to have to work out, like maternity leave for pastors is going to be an interesting one. My son was born in my final year of seminary training back in the '90s, and that really threw a spanner in the works with my training. And I worked out that it's actually difficult to do it all, but if your family support you, and obviously my immediate and extended family do, they take the journey with you as does your community, and somehow it works.

I've just been reading about Jacinda Ardern's new book and about leadership. The quotes that have come out about compassion and kindness really resonated with me as I think about servant leadership, and as I think about power. Just because I'm ordained now, does that mean I have more power? No, I don't think so. I think I have the responsibility now to lead responsibly and with humility. And I think as women juggle things like motherhood and whatever other roles they have, you certainly need strength, but often you need humility along with that as well. And humility, which doesn't mean that you're lesser than, but that you understand that if you have leadership, it's actually there for the benefit of others, not for your own power.

Host:

What about those Biblical passages which are less than helpful in your...(laughs)

Sue Westhorp:

Less than helpful is a good way to put it. (laughs)

Host:

Women should keep silent in the Churches. I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp the authority of a man. This complementarian interpretation that men and women are different and have essential but complementary roles to play.

How do you reconcile that with your achievements?

Sue Westhorp:

Yeah, well, my understanding of the Scriptures is that some of these passages were written to particular times and particular audiences, and worked within that context and in that society. I hear the call to Mary Magdalene to go and tell at the tomb.

So many other places in Scripture where people are told, 'go and tell what you know of God', that trumps, I think, anything else I've written that was perhaps written in a different context. I understand that there are people who interpret those passages differently, and somehow we need to work alongside each other in that, particularly in our Church.

Host:

As they say, 'there's a thousand different ways to point to the moon. They're all different, but they all end up pointing to the moon'. Have you heard that expression?

Sue Westhorp:

I have heard that before. I think if we're all pointing to God, I think that's a good thing.

Host:

And your thoughts on this, Charissa?

Charissa Suli:

I think often Scripture's interpretation, right? So I think often at times it's misinterpreted. And yes, there are a few passages in the Bible that have been used to say women shouldn't lead, preach or teach. But I genuinely believe when you actually go back to Jesus' ministry and the way he valued women, he didn't just include them – they became the first preachers. They were the

first ones where Jesus revealed he's the Messiah, you know, the Saviour of the world. So, I believe that there are lots of examples in the biblical texts that actually shows how Jesus had invited women, he had seen them, heard them and, you know, encouraged them to lead. He had no problem sitting with women, even though there are times when they're unnamed women, but often it was the unnamed women that actually transform a whole community.

Host:

Charissa, when you preach or lead, do you still encounter the congregation members who struggle with accepting your authority?

Charissa Suli:

No, it's been a very long time. I can't even think of a situation since going through my journey to ordination, being ordained as a minister and now even President.

I think there are times when I've been hesitant on myself, like, especially being head of Church, but there's a lot more love and support out there for women in leadership.

Host:

How about you, Sue?

Sue Westhorp:

Yeah, well, I'm a bit of a novelty, so still in my Church, but I have experienced great support, great love.

There's something about embodying now the decision from Synod. People saw me get ordained. They've seen that the Church has changed which means that goodwill and the relief they feel actually flows on to how they treat me as well and how they hear me. I've had comments from people, from women particularly, about how amazing it is to hear a woman preach, but also to hear a woman preside over commune, to say the words of institution. Even that change in pitch of voice is a profound thing for some people. So, kind of underestimate, I guess, how decisions like our Church's decision to ordain women affects just the people in the pews.

Host: And especially given you've come from a lifetime of chaplaincy, where it's all about service and care for the needy.

What kind of people did you encounter? People with post-traumatic stress disorder?

Sue Westthorp: Yes, I worked with Vietnam Veterans for a while. Hearing their stories and them trying to make meaning of that. I also worked in palliative care.

Host: This is the real cutting edge of meaning.

Sue Westthorp: Well, it is. It's where people are really wanting to tell their stories and make sense of their stories and find meaning. So, it's a very privileged place to be but it's also a place where people are ready to talk.

Host: If you've experienced war or are approaching death, what have you learned from these people?

Sue Westthorp: Well, I've learned that life is precious. And unexamined life is not helpful to actually do the hard yards and to ask yourself the questions about your life, but also to be able to share a story, to share your own life story with people is a very healing thing. Yeah.

The importance of story is true. Yeah.

Host: I don't doubt that's powerful, but war and death can turn people away from religion.

Sue Westthorp: Absolutely.

Host: Even God.

Sue Westthorp: Absolutely, they can. And they can actually turn them towards the God that they fear, the God who judges

them or the God who has allowed these things to happen. So, to be able to talk about mercy, to talk about acceptance and unconditional love. Well, I felt it was a gift I could bring into these spaces to let people know they were accepted as they were, and that God particularly was present in suffering.

Charissa Suli:

It's true though, war and death can turn people away from God, and we need to be honest about that because we are acknowledging what people are feeling and what their own experiences are. And you can't blame them when they're seeing innocent lives destroyed, or if they're going through personal grief, whether it be suicide or whatever it might be. I truly believe it gets to a point where they will ask, 'Where is God in all of this?'. That's not a lack of faith, actually. It's a cry from the heart. And so, when you've looked to every single avenue to try and answer, you know, this deep cry, you know, the deep hurt and pain and suffering, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Like even Jesus said that just before he was crucified. So, I believe that when the Church can be a place where they can engage and have an authentic and real conversation with those who may say, well, war and death turn people away from God, I actually think that it awakens deeper questions for people. And my experience has seen people then want to explore their own faith or their own spirituality or then to find healing again.

Host:

And what do you think about people who want to find answers in what they might call spirituality but not religion, Charissa?

Charissa Suli:

I think people will discover that their spirituality is about their relationship with God. And they'll then discover that their relationship is also about their neighbour. I think often we get spirituality and religion is mixed up, or people get confused by the terms. But

again, I come back, well, the Church has a place there to help people understand spirituality and religion.

I think, if we come back to the call of the humanity of people and focus on what are people looking for and how can the Church respond, the Church can respond with a message of hope. And what it means to be part of a Christian community where, you know, all people are welcome, or people, you know, there's opportunities, or there's spaces there where they can have these deep spiritual, theological conversations, or even just simple conversations about, I'm not doing well, I'm not okay. Can you talk to me?

Sue Westhorp:

Can I just add something there, James? When I was talking about chaplaincy before, I realised that what I left out was, we're actually called to be there to listen and to be present.

Charissa Suli:

Yeah.

Sue Westhorp:

And often I think the Church is seen as someone who will come in and tell you how to live your life. I think we begin from a place of listening to pain, for people to lament and to be able to cry out and to just speak of their experience. So maybe, yeah, I would say the listening is the place where we start. We don't start with telling people what they need.

Host:

Well, two points, I'd say. What happens if, when you're listening, you hear someone say, 'Why would anything remotely approaching a good God give me the pain you've given me? Why would such war be allowed?'. And, as for not telling people how to live their lives, only this week the largest Protestant denomination in the United States – the Southern Baptists – voted to endorse those efforts to overturn same-sex marriage. So yeah, there's a couple of curly ones for you.

Sue Westhorp:

Of course. And I mean, these are the curly ones, and these are the questions that I don't actually, the good God question about the suffering. I don't know that I have the answers to that, and I often have been asked that in chaplaincy, and I have to be honest and say, 'I don't understand. I don't understand why. What I know is that God is a loving God, and it's hard to reconcile'. And I think that's where, even for those of us who are ordained ministers, doubts it's alongside faith, because it's hard to reconcile.

As far as Churches speaking into issues like you were just talking about, I think it's no wonder Churches have a bad name when they tell people how to live. It's actually not about telling people how to live. It's about inviting them to know about God.

Charissa Suli:

I agree, and also I want to open what Sue's saying, because as a Church, our role is not to give away easy answers because there are times where we just don't have the answers. But I think if when we are faced with those kinds of questions, for us, it's about standing with them, standing in solidarity with those who are grieving or to pray when others can't and to speak peace in such a violent world. And to keep saying that even when it's hard, that love is stronger than hate and life is stronger than death.

Host:

And Sue mentioned doubt. I mean, doubt has a bad name, is this horrible thing, and yet it's the one thing that binds everyone. We all have it.

If you look at it another way, it can be as affirming as certainty, because you know you are with all other people when you know, approach the challenges of life, and you just can't make sense of them, and you're riddled with doubt. I mean, that's where you're, the equality of all mankind or humankind comes through.

Charissa Suli:

And I think it's part of the journey of faith.

You know, some of the most faithful people I know also carry, you know, the questions, the pain, the doubt and uncertainty. But I think we've got to free people, like liberate people to actually bring their doubts and their concerns and actually name what they're really feeling. Because I think often in the past, you were not allowed to talk about your pain, right? Or to even have some kind of doubt. But again, when you look to scriptures, you know, Thomas is known as a doubter about doubting Jesus' resurrection until... But then I love that even that particular story, Jesus doesn't shame him. Like, shame on you for not believing your friends, you know, who told you I'd resurrected from the dead, but he continued to meet him with love and gave him what he needed in that time. And I believe that Jesus does that for us even today.

Host:

You'll be trying to replicate that approach, Sue, in your ministry?

Sue Westhorp:

I think so. I want people to ask questions. I want people to ask the questions that perhaps I haven't had the courage to ask in my own faith journey.

I want people to not feel ashamed about wondering, is this true? Is God really good? In the Psalms, we are angry with God. It shows us that we can be angry with God. We can rail against him. We can say, 'what on earth are you doing?'. We can invite people into that space. It's not about having all the answers. It's not about not sometimes hanging on by your own fingernails even when you're preaching, but it's trusting that God is there, even if we don't quite understand what on earth is going on sometimes.

Host:

And even though so many and an increasing number are saying he's not there.

Sue Westthorp:

Yeah. Yeah, that's the reality we face. And I think maybe there's a key in spirituality, as I think about how I've worked with that term in chaplaincy, too.

When I talk about meaning, purpose and connection, maybe there's another way in for people to know God. We do know God through the Scriptures, and I would always say that that's important and vital, in fact. But how else do they experience the wonder of God? Often people see their spirituality is connected with nature. I think being able to expand into those areas and have conversations in those spaces, allow people to share their own experiences of what they consider to be divine, actually can lead us towards conversations about the God we know in the Bible.

Host:

Well, on Radio National ABC, this is God Forbid. I'm James Carleton. We are talking with Susan Westthorp and Charissa Suli, women in religious leadership and more.

You're talking about finding God in, or finding a sense of spirituality in nature. That is obviously something that can broaden the message of divinity or spirituality, make it more accessible, and it can also be perceived as watering down a somewhat more sacred message. How do you find that challenge or dynamic playing out?

Sue Westthorp:

I see it as an entry point, not as something in and of itself. So that's the way I view that. I know that people can form spiritualities around any experience of anything. It's actually about whether it's an entry point into a conversation about who God is, who the God of the Bible is.

Host:

What if it isn't, though? What if...

Sue Westthorp:

Well, then I'm...

Host:

What if it's not a theistic understanding at all?

Sue Westthorp:

Well, I want to listen to everybody who wants to tell me about what's important to them. That's the journey they're on. I mean, I would hope that they would discover God and Christ through that. Maybe they will and maybe they won't. I just find it a really interesting starting point for a conversation when there is some acknowledgement that there is something perhaps bigger than ourselves.

Host:

And how do you see this playing out generationally? Today's young will be tomorrow's old. What will they be doing?

Sue Westthorp:

Well, the whole spiritual, not religious thing is, it's a big thing at the moment. But I also see people, younger people, wanting to form community. Often they've been isolated. I think of COVID. I think of all of the online stuff that happens, social media. People are wanting community. I wonder if we're going to have a return to people seeking community that is about faith and about things that are important to them.

Charissa Suli:

You know, I believe that young people today, that they do have a faith. They have a faith in God. And they are, I agree Sue, they're seeking community. They're seeking places where they can, they feel they belong. They're seeking places where they can come with their questions and their doubts. And they want a place where they can truly be their authentic self.

A lot of young people are not interested in a religion that is like performative or disconnected from your life. I just think of from my generation to even my children, my youngest is seven. And I think about, wow, what he knows now as a seven year old. He knows so much more about the world than I did when I was seven. So, they want something real, something that makes sense, something that stirs their spirit. And I don't

believe that they're asking for anything flashy in worship. I do believe there are young people out there, they love the bright lights and the loud music. But I believe that they want something that speaks to the world that they live in. You know, how can I explore my faith in terms of me wanting to advocate for social justice issues? Or how does the Church help me to bring my whole self here knowing that I have mental health issues? Am I still accepted? Can I still explore my faith knowing I have anxiety, ADHD, or I have a son that's got autism? You know, often the church building is not accessible for families who have children with autism.

So, I believe it's important that as we think about the next generation, that we ensure that it's authentic, people feel they belong, it's practical and I think the last thing I'll say that it does need to have purpose and there needs to be a justice element. I'm not saying that's for all, but what I'm seeing in young people today and in social media, and what they are following, I think the Church should ensure that they have a voice in the social justice space. But also, I think, most important is spiritual depth.

Host:

You agree, Susan?

Sue Westhorp:

I couldn't agree with you more. Yeah, absolutely. You said it beautifully, Charissa.

Charissa Suli:

Thank you.

Sue Westhorp:

And I think the connectedness to is about relationship.

Charissa Suli:

Yes, one hundred percent.

Sue Westhorp:

Yeah, and authentic relationships. So, people who care about them, not just because they want bums on seats in Church or something, but actually care about who

they are as people and accept them as they are. And as you said, Charissa, that social justice element that perhaps in previous generations has been conspicuous by its absence, or maybe only certain parts of previous generations. I think that now makes up a lot of what young people spend their time pursuing on social media, what their interests are, the lack of justice in places, perhaps like Gaza, inspires them to action in ways that perhaps my generation and other generations have been a bit slack about, I think. And the Church needs to be a place that is permission giving around that, rather than saying, 'no, we need to behave nicely'.

Charissa Suli:

Yeah.

Host:

And Sue, you hear two arguments coming up again and again from religious institutions as to why young people who no doubt are seeking authentic connection aren't turning to religion. It's either that the religion has watered itself too much down in search for relevancy, or it has stayed too true to bronze age stories, which are no longer relevant. And both camps insist it's the other who's to blame for this parlous state of religion.

Sue Westhorp:

Well, I think there's also another element about how safe our Churches have been as well, in terms we look at Royal Commissions into all kinds of things. Church as an institution is no longer found to be safe by many people. I think, how do we make our Churches safe? And I think we all work very hard at that now.

But, also the whole thing of being relevant is not about changing the nature of what we believe in the Scriptures, but perhaps listening to how it relates to people today. There are truths that stand the test of time.

Maybe the delivery can be different, but also I think one of the things we can do is ask people, 'how do you best

engage with the messages? How do you best engage in worship?’ rather than assuming we know what’s best.

Host: And when you think about the next generation of religious leaders, male and female, you’re optimistic?”

Sue Westhorp: I am because I think people are being allowed to stand up straight and tall as who they are. And so they can be authentic. They can be speak truth to power and also develop more awareness of how power works in leadership. That comes up in people’s education now in ways that it didn’t when I was at school. There’s great potential. And when I look now at our particular denomination and I see the potential women leaders within that denomination, I’m really excited.

Host: Even though there is increasing mistrust of authority and you are in an authority position, that means increasing mistrust in you.

Sue Westhorp: Absolutely. I know that it’s a difficult thing to wear a clerical collar, even though I’m doing that today. I know that people, ministers wearing clerical collars have been spat on and things like that.

The way we look at authority, the way we hold authority is not something that is given to us lightly, nor is it something that we should assume or presume. It’s something that has to be earned like trust. So, I think my being ordained a couple of months ago hasn’t felt like it’s suddenly given me authority. Maybe it’s invited me into conversations that I couldn’t have had before, but I do expect that people will mistrust me because of my position.

It’s up to me to show them that actually I’m a normal human being as well, who fails at things, who doesn’t take this sense of authority lightly, but wants to use it to serve people.

Host: Do you find it hard not to take these things personally?

Sue Westthorp: I don't actually. I think the past 30 years of this journey towards ordination and the battles and the struggles that have gone on have taught me not to take much personally.

Host: And if someone abuses you, do you think sympathetically they may be having some struggle, or do you think not unreasonably this is just I'm being a victim of bigotry and prejudice here?

Sue Westthorp: Well, I think maybe it's the age I've got to, and I now see both of those things. Maybe one comes more immediately to mind.

Host: They can exist together, can't they?

Sue Westthorp: Well, they have to because we all have our own stories and our own reasons for reacting in certain ways, but it does hurt. So that exists alongside understanding.

Host: Of course. I suppose the awareness of that must help in the dealing with it.

Sue Westthorp: I think so, yeah.

Host: And Charissa, you're not wearing a collar.

Charissa Suli: But I normally do, though.

Host: Oh yeah?

Sue Westthorp: Oh yeah, good on you.

Charissa Suli: Yes, I normally do.

Host: What reaction do you get?

Charissa Suli: I still get turning heads, not for the reason that back in the day, people turn heads. (laughs) This is like, oh my goodness, what's she wearing?

Host: And how do you see the next generation of religious leadership? It's a very fluid time for institutional religion.

Charissa Suli: The reality is there are many reasons why young people don't turn to religion. And I think part of it too is there has been moments of hypocrisy in the Church. Young people have a strong radar for what's fake.

Host: You're a grandmother now, you really know that.

Charissa Suli: Yes. So, you know, if the Church says one thing, we've got to ensure that we are, our practice is equal to what we say. And I do think as we think about the future for our young people, we need to ensure that we are inviting them and not have this expectation. Like I think about when I grew up, like it was just expected, like Sunday morning, get in the car, we're all going to Church.

But because of the change of context we live in, we have to remember that there's some young people who weren't raised in the Church. And so they're discovering for themselves this whole new spirituality or this new faith. There's the God, like, wow, I want to know more. So, we've got to also think about how we create space for those who want to bring their questions, as I've said earlier. I think the other thing too is that I don't think young people have rejected God. And maybe this is a wake-up call for the Church, that we do need to pay attention to this next generation, because we now have a chance to listen better. You know, we have a chance now to go deeper and create spaces where young people can see that faith can be

healing. It can be life-giving. It can be liberating. It can be reconciling for them. If we can pay attention to that, as religious institutions, I actually think we'll begin to see young people wanting to go back into the church buildings.

But then we also need to pay attention that maybe for a lot of our young people, being religious isn't just going to Church on Sunday. I think you will find that for them it's about the daily life. It's how they practice their faith every day, and how we continue to nurture that as a Church for our young people.

Host: That's a good thing.

Charissa Suli: Yeah, I think it's a great thing, yes. And we've got to accept the change. It's not going to look like what it did, you know, 40 years ago. And we need to pay attention to that. And how do we adapt and pivot in the proclamation of the word and building community? How do we utilise our digital spaces?

If our young people are scrolling, seeing negative, negative, negative, then we need to lean into how do we bring the positive or the voice of light, you know, or the voice of life into digital spaces too, which I think a lot of Churches are still exploring.

Host: What do you think, Sue, about this? Final word to you.

Sue Westthorp: The young people I talk to want to talk about God. They're not particularly interested in religious institutions, and I think that's the challenge. How do we as religious institutions then make it inviting, as Charissa said? I think young people do want to, they want to know about God, they want to explore, but if they have faith, they want it to be a bit more integrated with their whole lives. And so yes, the Sunday worship thing becomes a bit problematic, I think. It's not something we can expect.

We need to listen now to how it's going to work for them so that they can carry the future of the Church with them.

Host: You mean I have to live a good life seven days a week?

Sue Westhorp: I don't know about you, but I know I don't. But, I know God loves me seven days a week.

Host: Well, on that note, we have reached the end of God Forbid.

Sue, thank you in Melbourne so much for being on the show.

Sue Westhorp: No worries. Thank you for having me.

Host: Pastor Sue Westhorp in April became among the first women ordained into the Lutheran Church. She's pastor at St. Paul's Box Hill in Melbourne.

And in Sydney, our Ultimo studio, the Reverend Charissa Suli. Thank you, Charissa.

Charissa Suli: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Host: President of the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly.

You can email me at GodForbid@abc.net.au, follow and share the God Forbid podcast on ABC Listen, and find the details of the show on the God Forbid webpage.

Thanks to Bec Cushway for production this week. I'm James Carleton. Until next week, remember to be good.

This has been God Forbid.