



Season 13: Episode 6 | Lennett Anderson | Can the Church Still Transform Communities?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society, and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today, CBS Ambassador, Reverend Dr. Andrew Stirling, is in conversation with Lennett Anderson. Reverend Dr. Lennett Anderson is the Senior Pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Nova Scotia, a growing, multi-generational church, and he also serves as Assistant Professor in Leadership and Racial Justice at Acadia Divinity College. He holds leadership roles as well with the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship International.

A respected communicator, community leader, and advocate for racial justice, Dr. Anderson has served widely in education, civic leadership, ministry, and community transformation. He also is a retired Canadian Forces Chaplain, having served 20 years in Atlantic, Canada. His contributions have earned him numerous honors, including the Canadian Forces Decoration Medal, the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond and Platinum Jubilee Medals, and recognition by Maclean's as one of five Canadian pastors breathing new life into their communities.

So, he lives in Hammond Plains, Nova Scotia, with his wife and their three children. So please enjoy this conversation.

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Andrew Stirling: Lennett, first of all, let me welcome you to Scripture Untangled. I've looked forward to this for some time, I really have, and I'm just delighted that you can be with us. Can you tell us something briefly about your upbringing in the faith? And so, who were the main influences in the development of the faith? And maybe were there Biblical passages or a passage or a story that stood out for you that engendered that faith?

Lennett Anderson: Thank you so much. It is an absolute honor to be here with you today, and I'm humbled by the invitation, my brother. When it comes to my upbringing in the faith, I am profoundly grateful for being raised in a Christian home by parents who modeled faith before me.

My father served as a deacon in the church, my mother was a deaconess as well, and they were deeply involved in all aspects of the church. They really laid a foundation for my spiritual formation, teaching me the importance of prayer and discipleship, and giving participation in the church. I attended multiple services.

Back in the day, we had church at 11 a.m., 3 p.m., and 7. So I grew up in the church, midweek youth group, yes. But I also thank God for the godly influences of godparents. They were spiritual mentors to me in the person of Reverend Dr. Renford and Helen Bryant, and Joseph and Ollie Mack, who were the senior pastors of the Mother Church of the African Association, Cornwallis Street at the time, Cornwallis Street Baptist.

I just had phenomenal pastors that really helped in my spiritual formation. Calvin Simons, Willard Clayton, the list goes on. They modeled what faith looked like daily.

And so, I don't have really any one story or Biblical passage that inspired me, although I would say what stood out to me was the way God's Word was proclaimed from the pulpit. It was never merely emotionalism, but there was a cadence and a spirit, a conviction and power. Maybe that's the dynamite of the Black church experience, but Scripture really was made alive.

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Well, we know it's real, it's living, sharper than any two-edged sword. But I mean, the applicable aspects to daily life, I always left to encourage and inspired. And that was the makeup of my communal church, my community of faith. We called each other auntie and uncle and sister and brother.

And it was the place where dignity was restored, if I could say that. I would say, especially African Nova Scotians would say that the Black church is the place that gave dignity and respect. And so, it was an affirming place.

It was the best place for me to grow and to blossom.

Andrew Stirling: That's lovely to hear. It's encouraging.

And I notice even, you know, when I follow you sometimes on Facebook, you talk about sister this and brother that, and it's like a great big family, you know, and in a community like Nova Scotia and in the light of the history, which we're going to get to in a few moments time, that sense of an extended family in the faith is powerful. But you're now currently the pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church and the church in which you grew up, which is, I think, quite unusual for certainly most of my pastor friends. Can you tell us something about the unique nature of that congregation and how it's changed over the years, even, Lennett, since you first were sort of formed there? I love this question.

Lennett Anderson: I love everything about it. Any opportunity I have to speak well of our community of faith, I could easily take the next 35 minutes to talk about my home church. This is not an advertisement, by the way.

But I am so proud. What I want to say, let me answer it this way, as a proud African Nova Scotian, eighth generation Canadian, from the community of Upper Hammers Plains. This is one of the original sites where we arrived from the War of 1812.

It's a community that was founded by free blacks of the war. And I currently serve as the 19th pastor of this historic church. And EBC is so unique in so many ways.

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It's not just the church I'm currently pastoring or my home church. It literally is my home. Mom went into labor on a Sunday morning in the choir.

And so, I mean, I was literally, yeah, that's been my stomping ground, you know. And when I was baptized in 1984, I became the youngest member, according to the church's history. And as I mentioned previously, just growing up in that nurturing, affirming environment really aided in my spiritual formation.

When I became the lead pastor in 1999, we were a communal church. Those who lived in the community attended. Many walked to church.

It was a membership of about 35 to 45 individuals, you know. And yeah, I love the verse, do not despise the day of small beginnings. The last membership Sunday that we had, we had a flag ceremony where we asked everyone to take their flag of nationality.

And Andrew, there were 42 countries now represented in our congregation. This is the Lord's doing. It's just marvelous in our eyes to see a historic, predominantly Black church now with that kind of ethnicity and diversity.

I think that's what makes it such a unique spot. It's a testament that it's the Lord's doing. And EBC is not just multicultural, it's multi-inter, well, no, let me say it this way.

It is interdenominational in that while we are Baptist foundationally in our core, I know the Baptist distinctives, you know, but we have members of the Anglican Church, the United Church. We have members of the Presbyterian Church of God of Prophecy. We have the Charismatics. We have Church of God in Christ, Church of God, and I'm thinking Seventh-day Adventists and even United Pentecostal Oneness.

So here we are in a Trinitarian congregation, but there are those that believe I should be baptizing in Jesus only. And so, it's a dynamic that I have not seen anywhere else, really.

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And I need help many days. But what I love most about our church is the deep community engagement and the prophetic voice. We have not lost our voice in standing for justice and believing with conviction, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that silence in the face of evil is evil itself. Not to speak is to speak.

And so, we as a church have modeled real engagement and advocacy, and I think that's part of our unique DNA.

Andrew Stirling: It's interesting that you say that, Lennett, because I think that engagement with the community is very important.

I mean, you know, you have very engaging and lively worship. You can see that online. What people often don't see online is sort of the work that you do.

And even, for example, water supply. I mean, you know, you became advocates for, you know, people having proper water in the area that you were in. And so, you know, there's been so many things that you have done.

Tell us a couple more, if you can, about that.

Lennett Anderson: Well, thank you for highlighting that, and that is a very recent scenario, because many times when we talk about race relations and the injustices of the past, people go back several generations, you know, like my grandparents are proud descendants of the community of Africville, for example. But people would often think, Lennett, are you stuck in the 50s or the 60s? Like, it is 2025.

But it was in 2024 that we discovered during the historic wildfires where we were all evacuated, we discovered that our fire hydrants were dummy fire hydrants. They don't work. And they were intentionally placed there by the municipality.

When the fire men and women went to the fire hydrants, they put out the... no water was flowing. How is this even possible in 2025? To know that the municipality behind closed doors voted to install very small pipes so that we could... And so, yes, when the church discovered this story, we had to speak to that.

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And we're fighting now, and I'm glad to report that tender is going out or request for engineers to submit drawings for a new water system and new pipes and proper fire hydrants. But again, the church was on the front lines. When it comes to consumer racial profiling, we had to work hard with the Human Rights Commission and our Baptist convention.

I am so grateful for the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada who became allies in that fight to see their brother and their sister fighting for justice when it comes to consumer racial profiling. When it came to police checks, you know, African Nova Scotians make up 2.8% of the population, and yet we make up 44% of the RCMP stops. I was never great in math, but I know 2.8 should make up 41%.

Andrew Stirling: No, it's disproportionate, isn't it?

Lennett Anderson: Oh, for sure. Yes. And so, when we talk about our education system with the labeling of African Nova Scotian learners with IPP, normally IPP, what does that stand for? Individual Program Plan.

It's normally for a student who is struggling or who's having difficulty with the regular curriculum. So, if a parent gets that call that we're going to assist your student with an IPP, that's normally a very good thing. But again, we are over-represented as racialized learners.

And with that designation on your report card, you can never go on to community college or university. And so, the province and the Department of Education just removed, they put a stop to that. But again, it's the church raising the issue and fighting for the right of our learners and our students not to be demonized because of behavioral problems when there's nothing intellectually wrong with our scholastic ability.

So, brother, the struggle is real. The struggle is real.

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Andrew Stirling: And your congregation, as you said, has been very much at the forefront of it.

But you, also yourself have quite a rich background too, which I think perhaps aids in guiding some of these things. I mean, before you received your call to EBC, you were a chaplain in the Canadian Forces, Lennett. And what are your outstanding memories about that time? And how has it helped form and shape your ministry? How do you move from some military chaplaincy into a ministry in Hammond's Plains?

Lennett Anderson: Yes.

I had the great fortune of serving our country for just shy of 21 years. I didn't make it to 21, but I can say 20. 20 good years, both regular force and as a reservist in the Canadian Armed Forces.

And I was fortunate to be the recipient of the ROTP program. That's the regular officer training program. So that includes a full scholarship for undergraduate studies.

I had to go to Dalhousie University. So, I'm proud of that. Royal Roads closed the year I joined and the RMC in Kingston could not take everyone.

And so, I got to attend Civilian University. And I'm so glad for that. But one of the defining moments in my career was the chaplaincy.

Because I started as a finance clerk and then became a MARS officer doing navigation, sailing down to Bermuda, an island that you love. But when I joined the chaplaincy, what they modeled for me was collaboration, Andrew. The interdenominational working environment.

I was blessed. Our staff meetings, we came together every Monday. We read Scripture together.

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It was in that time that we heard different interpretations, different perspectives of the passage. And it really helped in our sermon preparation for the week, whoever was in charge of chapel. But it was so foundational on how I lead today.

I didn't realize how much I was influenced by the military, their structure, vision casting and team building and the discipline required. It shaped me more than I'm probably willing to admit.

Andrew Stirling: Oh, I'm sure it would.

I mean, you can't be in an environment like that and not be formed by it, right? And there are disciplines and there are traditions and histories and so on that sort of shape the way you are and the way you think, aren't they?

Lennett Anderson: But that experience really reinforced my belief in the power of collaboration, servant leadership. They modeled fostering community. And those are principles that help and guide my ministry today.

So, thank you for asking that because we had to walk alongside, even the job description was as a chapel to provide a ministry of presence. And I said, I love that job description. I'm trying to get the church to change that, you know, just to be present with people, to show up, to walk with them through the valleys and the high points, you know, a ministry of presence, to care for people from all walks of life.

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Andrew Stirling: You are now, Lennett, an assistant professor and part of the racial injustice leadership program at Acadia Divinity College, which, as you know, I know well, and we've already talked about race relations in Nova Scotia and Africville and so on, but how does your position now at ADC help the church's ministry in the broader sense, because you're now teaching students, you're now influencing the next generation, and maybe as sort of a part of that, what do you see the next generation of those who are going to come along and follow you, what do you see as their big needs and what are their challenges and how do you at ADC make a contribution to that?

Lennett Anderson: Wow, you have the best questions, Dr. Andrew.

Oh, thank you for that. Listen, I am humbled, honored, it's a privilege to serve this community at Acadia Divinity College, and yes, while I teach racial justice, a theory and practice, the theology and practice of racial justice, there's also three leadership classes, and so it's really the arm of practical theology where I engage with the students, and honestly, I try to create an environment where students feel safe to engage in honest and courageous conversations, discussions about race and faith. Many of our students are very cautious, they come in not wanting to cause any offense, not wanting to say the wrong thing or anything inappropriate, but I really try to just bring the temperature down and say, try it on me.

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Before you say something on the street, say it in the class, this is a safe space, and we believe in grace. I genuinely just want them to grow in their awareness, in their understanding, and in the commitment to justice, and because a key part is helping students understand how history shapes our present. You know, it's not lost on me that students often say, Professor Anderson, I just didn't know.

I didn't know that there would be issues of pipes and fire hydrants in 2025-26. I did not know that people would be paying property tax but don't have clear title to their land in Nova Scotia. I just did not know, and so I don't want to make it a black-white scenario. And so, we have students, sorry, we have guest lecturers that come, and they come from a range of racialized faith communities.

I love having Dr. Danny join as an Indigenous leader among us and discussing truth and reconciliation and the role of the church. We have a denominational leader of Asian descent who come, and she talks about Asian hate, even in Ontario, and cultural competencies, and what we can do as a church to be an inclusive and welcoming environment. I remember bringing in a Jewish professor talking about anti-Semitism and the contemporary examples of violence and hatred shown here in Halifax, the defamation of synagogues.

Again, that just happened this year, last month, and so we really want to talk about the heartbeat and not talk about social justice but Biblical justice, because I remind the students that justice is the heartbeat of God, that we have a God who speaks from Genesis to Revelation. We see this thread throughout the Holy Writ that He is merciful and kind and that we ought to act justly and love mercy, walk humbly. I believe that Jesus just modeled that for us, that He always reached out to those who were mistreated or overlooked and provided a model for us to follow and emulate today.

When you talk about the struggles of students, this next gen, the discussions in the classroom are so rich, but I love how they just want authenticity, they want relevance. They're not about a museum; they want to be a part of a movement. Many of our churches have become museums and they want relevance.

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That's what I'm hearing is a deep yearning for God. I love their prayer times, they're prayer warriors, there's intercession, but they often talk about ethical leadership as well. They're grappling with questions of inclusion and reconciliation and what does justice look like? So, they want to be a part of a reformation of transformative leadership in the community, and they really want the church to be involved.

That's a quick summary, if I could give that.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, I'm also thinking though in terms of, I mean just internally within themselves, I mean you're talking about, and rightly so, the importance of engagements, the importance of having a sense of the righteousness and the justice of God and so on. But in terms of their own life experience, they're in a world that is often shaken.

Leaders are seen to be unreliable. There is a fear of movements within the world that are destabilizing. They're going into a world where employment might be a problem or is already a problem.

In terms of their own sort of spiritual formation, Lennett, what are you seeing within them? What are they wrestling with?

Lennett Anderson: Again, I just go back to the authenticity. They want to be light and salt. There's a genuine passion to be His representative in the earth.

I told them a story last week in my lecture and I was making fun. My name is Lennett and my father's name is Lennett. So, I said growing up in my household, Lennett Sr. would often have conversations with Lennett Jr. and say, either change your name or change your conduct.

Because he would say, you're not going to have my name and act a fool or misrepresent me. And this is what they're grappling with. Many of the cases of fallen leaders, cancel culture, they want to be the real McCoy.

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They really, if I could use that phrase, sorry, but they really just, they don't want to bring shame to the name. And that's why when they talk about Alpha and having impact in this generation, they're talking about a surging of youth ministry and how this next generation is flocking back to the church. It's like revival is happening.

There's a hunger for God. And that excites me. I'm so excited.

I feel so old in this classroom. I give my examples. I talked about joining the military during the referendum and they said, "the what?" I said, you know, when Quebec was, and they're looking at me like, when was that?

Andrew Stirling: To them, it was just after World War II. You know that don't you? I actually had a student say, well, you know, that's a long time ago, like World War II, you know. That's hard to take.

Lennett, you, on a personal note, I think people would like to know from you, and a lot of our audience are people who deeply want to follow Christ.

And you don't come onto a podcast like this unless you're interested in what the faith is about and how do you live that life. How do you balance, when I look at your schedule, you know, your work in ministry of the church, your academic work at Acadia, your family life, your community engagement beyond the church in Nova Scotia, what's your advice for listeners as to how they should order their spiritual lives to remain focused on Christ in the midst of all the myriad of things that are brought into your life? How do you do it, Lennett?

Lennett Anderson: Brother, intentionality is the word of the day. Make room for Him to spend time in His presence.

I just came off of a 21-day fast, and one of the things I was fasting from was social media. And I did not realize how that even deepened my time in His presence, my quiet time, my time of reflection, because honestly, Dr. Stirling, balancing ministry and academics and family life and community engagements and speaking

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appointments, I have not always succeeded. Truth be told, I've often found myself out of balance, running on empty, even to the point that the chair of our board, our staff relations, had a conversation with me in November about using my vacation time.

And I said, well, can I roll it over to next year? They said, no, we don't allow you to roll it over. It's there because we care. We need you to care, self-care.

Much of my imbalance was self-inflicted. And so, one of the things I now have a group, and this is part of my staff, that will help me discern really which engagements I should participate in and which ones I should graciously decline. But structure has been so important in my life to bring balance back.

So, I work closely with my administrative staff who knows my heart and they know my heart. They know if anyone can get me on the phone, they're going to get it. Yes, because I have the disease to please.

Andrew Stirling: It's a horrible infliction, Lennett. It's a horrible infliction.

Guilty. Guilty.

Lennett Anderson: Being in demand is demanding.

And if we don't receive, we have nothing to pour out. And so family life, I thank God for three healthy children or teenagers, the 20-year-old. I mean, they're so active in basketball and sports, countless hours in the gym.

And it's important for me to be present. You know, presence is, a present. And so, my advice for anyone that's trying to bring spiritual balance into their life, I would talk about creating that structure.

Have that team around you, those who care enough to tell you, you know, they see the red flags. You're about to burn out and rekindle your fire or your desire to hear His voice. Wait patiently on the Lord.

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And so, I just allow people to have that honest conversation with you where they recognize that you're doing too much. And that saying no, I had to get to the place realizing that saying no to something is allowing me to say yes to a greater matter. The thing that matters most, God and my family and my community of faith.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, it's so right. You know, I heard a wonderful message at Regent Park College at Oxford by a black theologian, Anthony Reddy, who's a friend of mine. And he gave a fascinating talk.

And he was talking about how Jesus got away from the crowds and how Jesus went up a hill. And Jesus spent time with His Father. And even the Lord Himself made sure that He had time to be at one with the One who called Him and who loved Him and who sent Him, who sent Him.

And he said, you know, with all the demands, all the requests in life, and it doesn't matter who you are or what you are. It doesn't matter whether you're at home with children or whether you're working in a corporate setting, or you're in a military and you're overseas, it doesn't matter where you are. To have that time aside, he said, just like the Lord had, is so important.

I want to go back to, you know, we're getting close to the end of our conversation. But there's something that really struck me about you. And of course, as you can imagine, it's very relevant for me.

And that was when you made a visit to South Africa a couple of years ago. I think it was a couple of years ago now. And in terms of connecting with roots, in terms of connecting with your background and knowing the rich tradition of the Christian faith and how strong it is within the black community in South Africa, what did you derive as a benefit for you? And what did you sort of bring back, Lennett, to the community in Hammonds Plains?

Lennett Anderson: That was a defining moment in my life.

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I'm ashamed to say it was my first time on the continent. But what an experience when my feet touched the soil. I have always read Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

I thank God for their legacy in this world and in the Kingdom. And my takeaway was this Umbuntu. I am because we are.

The connectiveness of humanity that I am my brother's keeper. There was so much I did not know going through the museums, going through the Desmond Tutu Museum and hearing his concept of the Kingdom of God. I just believe we are in a very geopolitical climate and we're so torn.

But this concept of the Kingdom of God and being His representative and realizing that his perspective of the Kingdom of God was what kept him grounded. And it was so transformative for him that all the messages of Jesus were laser focused. He did not lose focus.

And so, I'm not saying that we should not respect our government or that we shouldn't pray for our government leaders. You know, yes, respect the laws and pay your taxes and do all those good things. But this earthly kingdom is not my ultimate reality.

We are citizens of a kingdom. Hebrews 12 says that we're receiving a Kingdom that shall not be shaken. And so, when I gleaned from the life of Mandela and Tutu, I came back with a new fire in my bones to really push the Kingdom of God, not to get so caught up in our current.

And I had to turn off the news because I was a news junkie, had to watch it before I went to sleep and it kept me up at night. But just the Kingdom of God, His righteousness, His reign, His rule, that we have a responsibility to be His representative, His ambassadors, and for His Kingdom to come and for His Will to be done in this earth. And so, brother, I came back with, as I said, with a fire and a commitment, with a resolve that I'm going to do this.

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I want Him to smile. And I believe that the church is called to be a witness to Kingdom values, to exercise authority and power and to let our big light shine. I don't like singing this little light of mine.

We know the King of glory. We know the Light of the world. I want to say we have a big light.

I want to be radiant. I want people to know the joy of the Lord, which is our strength. And so, yeah, when we focus on the eternal rather than the temporal, that's what I came around.

They did not know they were going to see it in their lifetime, but they fought as if they would. And so, I believe that the Gospel equips us to navigate fear and uncertainty and injustice, that this Gospel helps us to have hope and resilience and determination and faithfulness.

Andrew Stirling: Amen. Amen. Amen.

Lennett Anderson: I want to end well, sir.

Andrew Stirling: Ending well, I'm afraid we have to do. What a wonderful and rich time this is. And I thank you for your candor, for the joy, for that lovely sermon you've just given us at the end.

And I want to now ask you the question I ask every one of my guests, and that is, what can we as listeners, what can people in the Bible Society do to pray for you? What are just a couple of things, Lennett, that you would like us to pray for?

Lennett Anderson: Thank you. Prayer is welcomed. And I would appreciate prayers for wisdom, for discernment, again, as I seek to discern family life and commitments, community calling.

I would appreciate that, sir, that I'll be present with intentionality and that I will end strong. Yes, I don't want you to watch me, you know, crash and burn. If you could pray

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for resilience, for tenacity, but again, that I would discern the voice of God in this season as I seek to change a generation, even here at ADC, that God be pleased and God be glorified.

Andrew Stirling: Well, Lennett, be assured of that and be assured of our support and love and prayers for you in the important work that you're doing. And thank you for your time with us. And I know that it will be a blessing to many of our listeners who will, I'm sure, go away pondering some of the things that you have said and the observations you've made.

On behalf of the Bible Society, Lennett, thank you so much.

Lennett Anderson: Thank you, sir, for the opportunity.