

Doug Smith ([00:07](#)):

Well, hey, leader, and welcome to episode number 359 of the L3 Leadership Podcast, where we are obsessed with helping you grow to your maximum potential and to maximize the impact of your leadership. My name is Doug Smith, and I am your host. In today's episode is brought to you by my friends at Beratung Advisors. We're also recording live from the reiturn.com studio, which you'll hear more about in just a moment. If you're new to the podcast, welcome. I'm so glad that you're here, and I hope that you'll enjoy our content and become a subscriber. Know that you can also watch all of our episodes over on our YouTube channel at L3 Leadership, so make sure you're subscribed there as well. And as always, if you've been listening to the podcast for a while and it's impacted your life, it would mean the world to me sincerely.

Doug Smith ([00:44](#)):

If you would leave us a rating in review on Apple Podcast or Spotify, that really does help us to grow our audience and reach more leaders. So thank you in advance for that. While Leader in today's episode, you'll hear my conversation with Heather Zempel. If you're unfamiliar with Heather, let me just tell you a little bit about her. Heather is a native Alabamian who currently leads the discipleship efforts at National Community Church in Washington, DC where she oversees small groups, directs leadership development training, and serves on the weekend teaching team. She attained her bachelor's and master's degree in biological engineering from Louisiana State University. She worked as an environmental engineer and as a policy consultant on energy and environment in the United States Senate before coming on staff at National Community Church. Using her educational background, Heather can now be found exploring environments that foster spiritual growth.

Doug Smith ([01:30](#)):

She lives on Capitol Hill where she can be found enjoying the adventures of parenting with her husband, Ryan, as they raise Sawyer, their fun-loving and energetic daughter. Heather is the author of Sacred Roads Community is messy and amazed and confused, and I love, love, love this conversation. Heather is so much fun and she's absolutely brilliant. And in our conversation, you'll hear Heather talk about a few things. You'll hear her talk about how to discern your calling throughout your life. You'll hear her talk about what it's like to minister to leaders in Washington dc, her advice to women in leadership, her thoughts on church and politics, and what she's learned from Mark Patterson and so much more. And you're just gonna have a joy listening to this, so get ready. But before we dive into that, just a few announcements. This episode of the L three Leadership Podcast is sponsored by Beratung Advisors.

Doug Smith ([02:12](#)):

The financial advisors at Beratung Advisors help educate and empower clients to make informed financial decisions. You can find out how Beratung Advisors can help you develop a customized financial plan for your financial future by visiting their website@barongadvisors.com. That's B E R A T U N G advisors.com. Securities and investment products and services offered through lpl, financial member of FINRA and SIP C Beratung Advisors, LPL Financial and L3 leadership are separate entities. I also wanna thank our sponsor, Henne Jewelers. They're a jeweler earned by my friend and mentor, John Henne and my wife Laura and I got our engagement and wedding rings through Henne Jewelers and had an incredible experience. And not only do they have a great jewelry, but they also invest in people. In fact, for every couple that comes in engaged, they give them a book to help them prepare for marriage.

Doug Smith ([02:58](#)):

And we just love that, that, so if you're in need of a good jeweler, check out [hennejewelers.com](http://hennejewelers.com). And I also wanna thank our new sponsor, [reiturn.com](http://reiturn.com) and leader, let me just ask you this. Have you ever had an interest in investing in real estate? Well, now for as little as \$500, you can become a commercial real estate investor. Just visit [return.com](http://return.com) to learn more. That's R E I T U R n.com. Investing involves risk. Please consult a return offering circular if you're interested in investing. And with all that being said, here's my interview with Heather Zempel. Well, hey, Heather, thank you so much for being willing to take the time to jump onto the podcast. Really looking forward to our conversation. And I actually wanna start with just talking a little bit about your journey. Uh, you had started out your career in politics, uh, but you ultimately decided that the ministry, uh, in the church world was the biggest place that you can make an impact with your life. Can you kind of give us some context of that part of your journey?

Heather Zempel ([03:52](#)):

Absolutely. And Doug, thanks so much for the opportunity today. It's a joy and and privileged to to be with you and to be with your listeners. Uh, so thank you, uh, for the invitation. Yeah, I, I came to DC back in 1998, uh, kind of ready to change the world. Uh, but before that I was actually in engineering. Like I went to college, studied biological engineering, got my master's degree with an emphasis, environmental engineering, uh, and, and, and worked in that field for a while. And then in a series of crazy events wound up in DC working in the United States Senate on environment energy policy, and, and just started going to National Community Church when it was still one church and one location in the movie theaters at Union Station <laugh>. And some people have these great stories of being, you know, called into the ministry.

Heather Zempel ([04:47](#)):

Right. And, uh, I would say that for me it was more like a long journey of being tricked into it. <laugh>, uh, lead, uh, my, my boss and lead pastor and friend Mark Patterson, uh, he, one of his greatest gifts is seeing potential in people and calling it out. And so, uh, he had asked me, I'd, I'd been in Nashville working as a, as an engineer, was considering moving back to DC and he said, Hey, would you be willing to come on part-time about 10 hours a week just to oversee our small group ministry and then we're gonna hire someone full-time in nine months? Well, that conversation was back in 2001, and here we are, uh, 2023. And, um, I, I kind of came to this point where I was working two full-time jobs and I, I knew my calling was to make disciples. Hmm. And so whether I did that in an engineering office or in an office in the US capitol of 20 people, or in a, in a group of leaders that are influencing 20 offices on Capitol Hill, uh, I, I, I started looking at where am I feeling most fulfilled? Where am I seeing the most fruit? And this isn't gonna sound very spiritual, but where was I finding the most fun mm-hmm. <affirmative>, like, where was I just enjoying life and enjoying ministry to the fullest? And, uh, and, and so I, I leapt into the world of, uh, quote unquote full-time ministry. And I, I've loved it. Haven't learned back.

Doug Smith ([06:16](#)):

Yeah. So I, I mean, it may be what you just shared, but, you know, any advice for, you know, I know for me, and I mean I've been walking with God for, you know, 17, 18 years and I think a prayer we always need to pray is, God, what is my highest and best use in this season? A any other advice for mm-hmm. <affirmative> for discerning that and, you know, how often you need to, I'm just curious cuz I think a lot of people are there.

Heather Zempel ([06:35](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And, and for me, I mean, the part that I skipped is, is kinda the more spiritual part, right? Like, I, I spend a season of prayer and fasting and seeking counsel. And what I've found is that when you fast, God is incredibly talkative, but often not answering the questions you're asking <laugh>, it's just like, oh, I've got Heather's attention, so I have some things to say. No, they're not what you're asking, but it's what you need to hear. Um, and, and through that process for me, there wasn't a clear direction, uh, there wasn't a clear calling of that I needed to be obedient to. And so, like I said, I, I looked at where I was feeling the most fulfilled, seeing fruit and, and having the most fun. I, some other variables that I share, especially when I'm talking with younger leaders, are things like, um, when you think about, I think calling is multidimensional, it's kaleidoscopic, right?

Heather Zempel ([07:28](#)):

So, uh, there's, there's who we're called to minister to or to serve or to lead. There's where we're called to do it and there's what we're called to do. And at some point in our lives we hit these golden moments where those three things converge perfectly. But in most seasons, especially as we're developing as leaders in our younger leadership days, there's kind of a, we have to prioritize one or the other, or maybe one or two of those. And so, so I often ask leaders to think about, you know, those, those things in their lives. And, uh, and then for me personally, I, there are rhythms in life. There are moments cuz when you talk about greatest impact, there's a greatest impact you can make by going broad, how do I influence the most people with the message of Christ or with, you know, the leadership gifts that God has entrusted in me. And then there are moments where the greatest impact you have is actually when you go very deep with a few. Mm-hmm. And so it's discerning what season are we in? What is God calling me to be obedient to in this season? And also what, what's gonna lead me personally as a leader into the greatest areas of Christ-likeness in this season.

Doug Smith ([08:36](#)):

Wow. A any thoughts on just the pursuit of the masses versus the pursuit of going deep with people? Is that a calling thing? Is there anything that leaders should be cautious of on the, the ambition side there? Any thoughts?

Heather Zempel ([08:50](#)):

Oh, yeah. I mean, I think motives is always <laugh> something we've gotta, we, checking our ego and checking our motives is something, at least for me, uh, that I am constantly having to, to take to, you know, the foot of the cross and say, you know, God, I need you to, to sanctify, you know, my motives. Um, and what are you asking me to be obedient to? I know for me personally, I, I try to have a, a rhythm in my life. Uh, if I'm in a book writing season, for instance, I know that like, okay, this is investments I'm making to go, you know, about this deep, but with a lot of people and pray that God will use these words to influence, to encourage, to equip. Um, but when I get done with this season, I'm probably need to step into a season where I gather 6, 8, 12 young leaders around me and I empty out everything I've got to them over the course of the next few months or years, you know?

Heather Zempel ([09:44](#)):

So for me it's a rhythm. I, I don't think there's a right or a wrong. I think there are different callings for different people and, and often different callings and different seasons. So, you know, when I think about people like Henrietta Mirrors gathering a group of, you know, people in her Sunday school class and around her table and, and, and winds up influencing a small group of people so deeply that then people like Billy Graham who sat under her influence go out and change the world on a broad scale. So,

uh, I think it's asking God, you know, what are you asking me to be obedient to in this season? And recognizing that, uh, for us it's about our inputs and then letting God kind of take care of the outputs.

Doug Smith ([10:25](#)):

Hmm. You know, a lot of what you mentioned around your calling is around discipleship, clearly a passion. Uh, I was just intrigued when you're like, Hey, is it a season to gather, you know, 10 to 12 leaders mm-hmm. <affirmative> What, what, what does discipleship look like intentionally in your life? Cuz I think everyone loves the idea of making disciples and, you know, mentoring next gen leaders, but they're not just gonna appear outta nowhere, it's not gonna happen by accident. Right. What's your process for

Heather Zempel ([10:49](#)):

That? Yeah, and, and it looks different in different seasons. Um, you know, I I try to, uh, kind of regularly gather some people around me for a more intentional discipleship process, whether that's us taking a book and going through that together, uh, or, uh, you know, journeying for a season together around some set content. But honestly, my favorite approach to discipleship is making it a lot more organic and just woven into my everyday life. Hmm. So come sit with me around my table, do life with me as I do it. If I'm traveling, I always like to have a, a young leader along for the ride with me because the reality is they can hear me talk all the time about integrity or honesty or patience, or fill in the blank. But when they see me in a real life situation, have to deal with an emotion or a crisis or something like that, that's gonna carry a lot more weight than just these words that I kind of throw out in a a in a teaching context.

Heather Zempel ([11:54](#)):

It also provides a lot of time for just natural conversations around calling and giftedness and how you wait on the Lord and timing and all of those things to take place. So I, I really like doing discipleship best just on the go. And for me, sometimes it's having that awkward moment where I say, Hey, I see giftedness in you. I see potential in you. I'd like to invest. Is that something you'd be, you, you'd be interested in? Is that something that you'd be open to? And, and that takes a little bit of humility to approach a young leader and have that conversation.

Doug Smith ([12:28](#)):

Well, I'm sure a lot of people are grateful that you do. I know for me, you know, when I think back to the pitiable moments in my life, it was a leader coming alongside of me and letting me do life with them. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> modeling a godly marriage modeling what a godly father looks like. Yeah. And man, I'm forever grateful. And you know, it's so funny. You ask, Hey, how could I ever repay you? And they all say the same thing as just, hey, do for, do for some, another young Doug, what I've done for you. And so that's Absolut's

Heather Zempel ([12:50](#)):

So rich.

Doug Smith ([12:50](#)):

So there's the organic, which I would agree, it's like life on life is so good. But then there's also structured systems. I know you do a lot at NCC with developing Next generation. You have programs around this. What do you guys do as an organization to develop NextGen leaders?

Heather Zempel ([13:04](#)):

Yeah, a lot of what we do is, is kind of through the fabric of our small group ministry. Uh, several years ago we launched, uh, environment called Freshman of the City. Uh, a lot of, a lot of, well, lemme back up. So a lot of colleges put a lot of time and effort and energy into freshman orientations because they wanna set up freshmen to finish well, to be all in, uh, to be to be fans and contributors to that college campus experience. And likewise, we were seeing lots and lots of young adults come to DC and they're ready to change the world. I was one of those, uh, in my early twenties. And there's nothing to orient them to the city <laugh>, nothing to orient them to how you do life in the city, how to be an adult, uh, in the city, and how to walk, how to marry your faith in your work.

Heather Zempel ([13:58](#)):

And so we launched this, this environment called Freshman of the City, where we try to address all of those issues and also pair mentors, people that are a little bit older, that have been around the sun a few more times, uh, to come alongside those young adults and, and talk about what it means to walk in the ways of Jesus in DC specifically. So that's one of the environments that we've had that we've seen a lot of success in. It's mid-size. Uh, people meet together in a large group, have dinner together, and then break into small groups. And, um, and then along with that we have some residential programs, some internships, fellowships, where people can come and walk alongside our staff for a longer period of time. And our goal in that is really to talk about how do you develop the character that you need to sustain the calling that God's placed on your life. Mm-hmm. Because I think, I think so much of leadership just rises and falls on your character. <laugh>,

Doug Smith ([14:52](#)):

Let, hey, let's dive in there. I'm very, very passionate about this subject and, and I love asking leaders about character development. Uh, it's actually one of our values here at all three, I tell people all the time, like, character development is the most important development cuz we want people to make it to their finish line. Like I had a leader tell me recently, there are way too many unfinished ministries in the world today. Mm-hmm. Um, so what, when you think about developing a character, like is that life on life? How, how can people grow their character in general?

Heather Zempel ([15:19](#)):

Yeah. Well, I think first it's about being intentional about it. It's about a recognition that how I finish is directly related to how I start and how I continue to grow. There's, there's never a free pass on intentionality and discipline towards character development. And so for me, it's, and, and the way I've tried to practice it in my life is one of the most valuable things is just having people around me that have permission to ask me anything at any time. Mm-hmm. That's right. And have permission to speak into anything they see in my life. Uh, and sometimes I have to sabotage myself, <laugh> like, uh, there, there, there are things that I know about me that nobody else knows, so I can keep that stuff hidden until it becomes toxic of my life. Mm-hmm. And so in those situations, I have to say, you know what, you, Jodi Ryan Hunter, whoever is in my life, like, I need you to ask me regularly about this particular thing.

Heather Zempel ([16:20](#)):

Uh, because I need to make sure that my character is growing, that I'm growing in integrity, that I'm growing in perseverance, that I'm growing in tenacity and, and this area. And you might not know that, but I need you to ask me regularly about how I'm doing in that area. And then I have blind spots. So having people that are willing to risk their reputation with me, their friendship with me, you know, my

risk, you know, being the, the recipient of my emotional response to that, uh, but willing to ask the hard questions and get my business. So again, it's about who you surround yourself with and who the people are in, in your life.

Doug Smith ([16:59](#)):

Yeah. And along those lines, I'm just curious, you know, we live in a world where everyone's getting canceled for everything. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, I'm just curious, do you, whether it's with your young leaders or as a staff at N C C, do you have any boundaries or, you know, policies that you've put in place to help leaders, um, keep their character or even just grow and develop it that have, that you've found useful over the years?

Heather Zempel ([17:22](#)):

Yeah. I, there aren't, I mean, obviously as an organization we have a lot of the expected policies, you know, related to, uh, to healthy boundaries, um, relationally, sexually, things like that. For me personally, uh, I've found that, and, and these are just kind of personal boundaries that I've put in place. Um, my, my husband knows my entire schedule and everyone I meet with and when I meet with them and why, and he has veto power over anybody that he's concerned about. Um, and, and the same goes for him. He's also on staff. He's one of our pastors. And so we have total trust in one another, even when it, you know, when it comes to, to meeting with opposite sex and developing, uh, you know, opposite sex, uh, you know, having counseling meetings and things like that. But, but we both know each other's schedules and there's veto power with kind of no questions asked. Like, if you've gotta check in your heart or your mind about this, then we trust that in each other. And then again, it's surrounding myself with people that, uh, that can ask the hard questions. And Ryan, my husband knows who those people are in my life, so he also has full access to like, Hey, um, this is something that we're struggling with. And so, you know, you've got permission to speak in to our lives with those things.

Doug Smith ([18:47](#)):

Yeah. So wise, thanks for sharing. Uh, you know, one thing you talked about in calling is place, uh, you went, you've, you went to DC 25 years ago, so congrats on 25 years. Wow.

Heather Zempel ([18:57](#)):

That I feel real old all of a sudden. <laugh>.

Doug Smith ([19:01](#)):

Uh, so I am curious, you know, I think p p I have all kind of thoughts about what they think DC is like, you've been ministering there for 25 years. What do you wish people knew Yep. About DC that they may not know?

Heather Zempel ([19:14](#)):

Oh man. Well, I, I just wish, uh, I, I think my hope is that people would think better of DC <laugh> than they often see portrayed in the media. Uh, I, I love this city. Uh, I can't pass by the capitol building or one of the monuments without having a deep love and appreciation for where I am. And, and really even to continue to be in awe of the place that, that I've been able to do life and ministry. I love raising my kid here. Uh, it, it has a, one thing people might not know about DC is there's kind of a small town feel to it, right? Um, and, but along with that small town feel, there is the opportunity to reach the world from where we are. And I love that. Uh, the thing that I like for people to know about those that

work in the government, whether they're elected officials or they're those that are serving, those that are elected, is they're people <laugh>. They're, they're people with hopes and dreams and fears and, and loves. And, uh, they're not, not a single one of them is a saint. And, and they're also not evil. So some of the words that I hear in media that describe the process or the people, uh, they're, they're people that need that also are looking for love and prayers and encouragement, and I think are, are doing their best to serve their, their, uh, their, their, the, the role that they've been given and the things that have been interested to them.

Doug Smith ([20:54](#)):

Yeah. And is there ways that, you know, even if we're not in DC when we think about politicians, that we can pray for them or minister to them just in general, even in our own, you know, neighborhoods, community, cities.

Heather Zempel ([21:04](#)):

Yeah. I, I mean, obviously praying for their families, remember, and, and I ask this question often, whether it's a member of Congress that is a part of our community or someone that's working on the Hill or in the White House, uh, just remembering to pray for their families. Like sometimes, you know, their kids didn't sign up to have their parent in the spotlight. Right. And so just praying for their families, praying if they're an elected official, praying for their staff, just that their staff would be people of integrity and people of honesty and perseverance that have servant hearts and, and servant perspectives. And then, uh, for those that are, that are working in, in that, that sphere, whether it's an elected official again, or, or serving, just, just praying for them personally, for their hearts, for their integrity and encouragement goes a long, long way. Hmm. When I was on the hill, you know, we, we often didn't hear from anybody that was excited about what we were doing, unless there was some personal, you know, gay into that. But we heard a lot from people that disliked, uh, the policies or the votes or the debates or the talking points. And so even just a quick note of gratitude, uh, I think goes a long way, uh, for those that are, that are in those positions.

Doug Smith ([22:19](#)):

Yeah. I'm, I'm curious just from, from being in politics to being there for 25 years, how have you seen DC or politics change in the 25 years you've been in town?

Heather Zempel ([22:29](#)):

Uh, this, I I, this is probably a, you know, a captain obvious answer, but honestly, social media has changed the whole game in ways that I think we haven't even been able to fully comprehend or articulate, uh, politics. It can't, it cannot be sound bited. And when we soundbite things to the level that they are now, sound, bited, <laugh>, uh, when we, when algorithms are feeding the information that they think that you want to hear, when you want to hear it, how you want to hear it, there's a lack of full story. There's a lack of those interpersonal conversations. And again, it, for me, it all goes back to kind of relationship. And, uh, I think that social media has made it harder, uh, to, to communicate across party lines, to work together, to tell a larger story, to nuance. A lot of the nuance is, is being lost. And that was always a challenge, I believe, with, with politics and with media in general. But social media has, has really changed that dynamic. And, um, yeah, it's, it's gonna be interesting to see how future years are, are continue to be shaped by that.

Doug Smith ([23:48](#)):

Yeah. I, I'm curious, and I don't know if you have an answer for this or not, but, um, from people I've talked to, I think a lot of people, it's similar to yourself, Hey, I'm coming to DC to change the world, <laugh>, I want to go into politics to come to change the world. The people who I talk to actually run for office or get in office, uh, yeah. Find at least what I've, from what I've heard, it's way more difficult to make a difference than they thought. Um, have you found that to be true? And, and I guess just if someone's listening to this in politics, I have, you know, friends, what, what advice would you give for them to make a difference where they're at?

Heather Zempel ([24:17](#)):

Yeah. Well the, the first thing that I, I would encourage, and, and, and again, this is particularly I think true of some younger leaders that are kind of beginning to serve in, in offices or be assistance. And one, you've just gotta check your ego at the door. Just check your ego at the door. Be more concerned about, you know, the name, uh, over the office than your own name. Be concerned about, uh, what can be accomplished when no one cares who gets the credit. And that's really hard on Capitol Hill, that's almost impossible to do, but if you can check your ego at the door, eventually your, your contributions are gonna be noticed. And, and I also think that's just about walking in the ways of Jesus. The other thing I would say is get submitted somewhere to someone who can teach you how to walk in the ways of Jesus in on Capitol Hill, in the White House, in the Pentagon, in the Supreme Court halls.

Heather Zempel ([25:16](#)):

You know, like, it's so, you get, you get sucked into the ego and the pride and the power here, and it's real subtle. And then all of a sudden you find that you're captive to these things. So finding someone who can disciple you in, in the ways of Jesus there. And then also, you know, encouraging, especially rising generations, make sure that you've got your nose and the Bible more than you have it in social media. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, make sure that you are being disciplined by the ways of God and not what culture is spitting out at you. We were not designed to intake all of the messages that are being thrown at us right now. And, and one quick thought about, you know, influence and, and how you influence my experience on Capitol Hill. I think even, I think personally what I experienced and also what I viewed with others is that a typical Capitol Hill staffer on any given day will simultaneously overestimate their influence and underestimate their influence.

Heather Zempel ([26:19](#)):

Hmm. And, and what I mean is this, is that, you know, I found myself at one point writing almost the same talking points year after year on the same energy topics for my member to take to the floor. Right. And, and there comes a point where, like the first time you do it, you think, man, I am awesome. Like I am writing a speech that this senator is gonna give on the Senate floor about this very important topic that is being debated. And then after a while you realize, well, I overestimated my influence there, <laugh>. And yet some of the conversations that you might have with a constituent or some of the services that you do to take care of somebody back home has a tremendous impact on that one life are on that one community. And so often that gets overlooked. The difference we can make in the lives of individual people or individual communities that we have been trusted to serve and to represent. So, so with younger leaders on capitalism, I'm like, look, you're overestimating your influence and you're underestimating your influence. The best thing to do is keep your head down, do what you do with excellence, and walk in the ways of Jesus and leave the results to God.

Doug Smith ([27:27](#)):



<laugh> talk, talk to just members of Body of Christ. So obviously it's a politically divided nation. There's people on both sides, uh, people who have made politics to God, I feel like in recent years. What's your all message at ncc just to the body of Christ when it comes to politics in the church and and following God?

Heather Zempel ([27:45](#)):

Yeah, and it's, it's, it's quite a journey, right? Um, we, we used to say that we were apolitical as a church and that was our goal. And then a few years ago we changed our language cuz we realized no, to be apolitical is to strip, um, the value away from those that are involved in, in this work. And, and we believe that this work is so important to the kingdom of God and, and we wanna honor that. And so, so we switched our language, not say that we're apolitical, like it's, it's not something we care about or it's something that's over there that we don't wanna have anything to do with, to just that we're nonpartisan. Hmm. And, and in our church, we have people that span the entire spectrum of political ideology. I mean, across the aisle and, and to the, to the edges and the extremes, right?

Heather Zempel ([28:37](#)):

And so we wanna honor the work that they do. We wanna disciple them in the work that they do, and, uh, and then continuously remind people and try to model that we're part of a, a kingdom that is bigger than these smaller kingdoms that we've given our allegiance to. And so it's, it's hard. I mean, we, you know, on, on any given Sunday, we at times find, especially in moments where the political tensions are high, there are moments where people will leave our church because we said too much, and then other people that will leave because we didn't say enough about whatever the issue of the day is. And, and I think we've just learned that that's the reality that we live in, and we wanna be a people that are first and foremost, uh, giving our allegiance to Jesus, which is not gonna put us, uh, in any convenient political party. So,

Doug Smith ([29:39](#)):

Yeah. Well, thank for, thank you you for sharing your deep insights into the world of dc I

Heather Zempel ([29:43](#)):

Appreciate

Doug Smith ([29:44](#)):

It. <laugh>, you're in, you're a global insider, so

Heather Zempel ([29:48](#)):

I certainly don't speak for the whole of DC but I do, I love the city and I love the people who are there.

Doug Smith ([29:54](#)):

I I wanna take a few minutes and talk about church. Obviously you've been in church world, uh, for many years. And, um, I'm just curious, what are you seeing in, in church? What are you seeing for the future of the church?

Heather Zempel ([30:04](#)):

Yeah. Well I, you know, when I, when I think about that, my mind immediately starts going to things like, you know, multi-site strategies, church planning strategies, digital discipleship, micro churches, multi-generational communities and things like that. But I think what I have been most confronted with in the past few months is just, uh, and I mean this has been a growing thing over several years. It's just the global impact of globalization on the church, the ways we've allowed it to impact us, and the ways that maybe we need to impact us in different ways. So, for instance, when we see the growth, the explosive growth of the church in the global south and in the east, and yet the lack of their voices, often in the conversations about how we do church and how we do theology. Uh, that's, that's what's shaking me up a little bit right now.

Heather Zempel ([31:02](#)):

I mean, just a few statistics that I just, I've ran across recently, like the idea that there are more Anglicans in Nigeria than in the US and Europe combined. Wow. That 20 to 30 years from now, the typical Christian will be an African woman, uh, than it Yale, 85% of the crew of members of crew, the Christian college organization, 85% are Asian, whereas the Buddhist organizations are white. Hmm. Um, there's something about the Christianity that we are propagating in the West. It's not grabbing the minds and the hearts of the imaginations of, of our own populations. Uh, and there's something I think that we need to learn from our, our brothers and sisters in the global south and in the East. That that's way like, sorry, that like went in a totally different direction probably than, um, than you were asking, but that's what I'm, I'm wrestling with these days. How do I learn more? How do I center and platform their voices more? And, and what can we learn from the worldwide church that we're maybe missing here?

Doug Smith ([32:08](#)):

Yeah, that's, I was gonna ask, you know, so, so what are you doing about that? Uh, <laugh> <laugh>, and I don't know that this is the answer, but one thing I, you know, I interviewed Mark a few years ago and he was just talking about the teaching team and how diverse you are. Mm-hmm. I think he only, I think he said he only speaks like 26 weeks a year. I know you're, you speak Yeah. Uh, what are you guys doing to get different? Or can you just talk about your teaching model? Cuz I think, you know, part of globalization is just hearing just what you said, hearing different voices. How, what's your perspective on that and how does that actually play out in and who's on stage sharing?

Heather Zempel ([32:38](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. I, pastor Mark moved to a teaching team model, uh, several years ago. And I, I'm just so grateful that I was invited to, to be a part of that, that team. And, uh, so that's right. He, he preaches about 26 times a year. And then there are others of us that, that get to kind of fill in six to eight times a year ourselves. We've actually experimented this year with moving to more live teaching at our campuses, which has allowed us to bring more voices onto the team. And, uh, I, the value I see, there's so many values that I see. One is just you're gonna get exposed to different life messages and life themes. Yes. Like we preach the gospel in ways that is very particular to us and to the stories that God has written in our lives. And so you get to hear that through a number of different voices, which just gives you, I think, a more well-rounded approach to scripture and, and, and theology and the gospel very practically.

Heather Zempel ([33:41](#)):

There are things that I can say that a white male cannot say, or would not be able to, would not have the same permission to say Pastor Marion can say things as a black man that I can't say. Um, I can talk very openly, uh, and honestly about my own, uh, uh, journey with infertility in, in a way that one of our guy teaching pastors can't. And, and that, so, so there's just topics and themes and threads that having a multitude of voices is helpful in. And then there's also I think, a very kind of more self-serving or very functional reason for having a teaching team. People in your congregation tend to connect most or think they connect most with the person who's on the platform. And so the person on the platform is who people wanna meet with, right? And so when you have a multitude of voices that are on the platform, it actually allows more opportunities to kind of, uh, people are gonna pursue pastoral care, pastoral conversations, and pastoral connections with more people on your team when they've heard that person on the platform. So that's a more just kind of a functional, uh, nice result of teaching team. But I've, uh, I, I, I think, I think teaching teams are very helpful for communicating the full gospel and the whole gospel to the community.

Doug Smith ([35:04](#)):

I'll, I'll let you share your new title cause I don't wanna butcher it <laugh>, but, so, but I do realize that, I thought this was fascinating. One of your responsibilities in your new role is you're launching businesses as mission. Yeah. And, and I, I've started to see this movement. I, I, can you talk about that? I think it's so fascinating. Please share your awesome epic title. Yeah.

Heather Zempel ([35:24](#)):

<laugh>. Well, we're still, we, one of the things we like to say at NCC is we like to pl we like to, uh, to, uh, build planes in the air. Yes. Like, we get an idea and we just run with it. You've interviewed Mark before, so he is probably shared with, with you, his philosophy is, you know, uh, fire, aim, ready, like, you know, he, he starts running before the picture is fully in place. And so my, my new title is Executive Director of the Dream Collective. And so cool Dream Collective is we incubate dreamers. We, we want people who have a vision from God. We want to give them a blessing and a birthright. We wanna give them a tribe of people that can rally around them. We wanna see dreams from God come to life. And so that finds expression in church planting in, like you said, launching business's mission, uh, in being engaged in certain spaces of cultural renewal.

Heather Zempel ([36:21](#)):

How do we commission artists to tell the story of God in, in moving pictures, in poetry, in sculpture, in ways that a pastor on a stage is not gonna be able to do? And so this is really kind of the outward facing arm of Ncc. It's our attempt to turn ourselves inside out to do more things where we have less control and get less credit. Things that don't have our names on 'em. And so the business side for us, the genesis of that story was, um, you know, years ago we decided to buy a property, but instead of building a church building, we built a coffee house. So we put Ebenezer's Coffee House at the corner of second and F Street with the idea that Jesus didn't just hang out in religious buildings. He hung out at Wells. Wells were the natural gathering places of society, and it's where he did some of his deepest ministry.

Heather Zempel ([37:15](#)):

And so, as a church, we have launched Ebenezer's Coffee House. We opened up a movie theater, uh, in, in southeast DC Miracle Theater. We have the capital turnaround, uh, near the, the Navy yard now. And so we believe just at our gut that the church belongs in the middle of the marketplace. And, uh, and for every church that we launch, we also wanna see a business that is operating according to Kingdom

principles. That is, is building towards cultural engagement and kingdom renewal. Uh, we wanna be a part of that. And so from within our church, we've seen more and more people that get a vision from God and they're running with it, are starting businesses. They're launching ventures, their founders, and, and we wanna, we've been able to be a part of that, um, kind of, uh, in a, in a non-formal way. And now we just wanna be more intentional about saying, what is your dream? Come dream with us. And we wanna do gatherings that inspire them. We wanna create networks that help them implement and deploy resources that, that make it happen. So we're building the plane in the air <laugh>, but we wanna be a part of the dreams that God has given to people.

Doug Smith ([38:33](#)):

Yeah. It sounds like a beautiful plane to be, to be building <laugh>.

Heather Zempel ([38:37](#)):

Um,

Doug Smith ([38:37](#)):

I wanna get into the lightning round a minute. I guess the last two questions I would ask, one, just obviously I, I respect Mark a lot, uh, I'm sure he could write a book on the lessons that he's learned from you. Uh, I'm just curious, being under his leadership for so long and being that close, what, what's maybe one, two the greatest lessons that you've learned being under his leadership?

Heather Zempel ([38:54](#)):

I, one of the things that he told me when I first came on staff was, you need to have thick skin and a soft heart. Hmm. Uh, he lives his life, uh, with the, the goal of being unoffended. And that's been so challenged to me, like every time it's like a masterclass, uh, the way he is able to love people and see people and value people, even those that disagree with him most and say the worst things about him. So that's, that's one of the number one things I've learned, uh, uh, from Mark. Thick Skin, soft heart, be unoffended. The other thing that I've learned from him is, I mean, there's so many things I could fill books and books with, with things that I've, I've learned from Mark. But the idea that God is always writing a bigger story, no matter what detour you, find yourself on, no matter what delay you feel like you're in, no matter what distraction or hindrance or hurdle you're up against, God's writing a bigger story. And if we plant ourself in his faithfulness in the past, it will grow in us faith for the future that we are looking into. And God's got blessings in categories that we have not even begun to dream of. And so just believing that God's writing a bigger story.

Doug Smith ([40:14](#)):

Beautiful. Uh, we can spend probably a whole podcast on this, so, but I'll just leave it open-ended. You're obviously a, a woman in leadership and leading for a long time. Uh, what advice do you have for either a woman in leadership and or women aspiring to leadership, whether it's in the church organizations in general?

Heather Zempel ([40:30](#)):

Yeah, and I, the first thing I would say there, my, my first, uh, encouragement is go listen to the interview you did with Katie Cole a few months ago. Her work with Women in Leadership is just at, at the very top. And so, uh, that would be the, the number one thing that I would encourage people to do. But also as women in leadership, I, I would encourage you first and foremost, like, keep your head down,

do things with excellence, focus on inputs, let God take care of the outputs. Um, I would say celebrate those around you. Often the biggest hurdles that women face in leadership, uh, granted there, there're there are plenty of hurdles that come from, you know, organizational structures and, and maybe men not knowing how to lead women well. But sometimes women, we, we see each other as a, as, um, as the, the, uh, the problem or the competition. And if we could celebrate one another and blaze trails for people coming behind us, that's what's gonna unlock a lot of doors for women and unlock a lot of opportunities and allow more women on the platform. And, uh, and I would also say if you're a woman in leadership and you see people that are empowering women, well celebrate that. Acknowledge that sometimes we can get so focused on what's wrong that we fail to recognize and acknowledge and celebrate what's right. So, so those are some things that I would encourage women in.

Doug Smith ([42:02](#)):

That's a good word. Um, by the time we've left that, I'm gonna dive right into the lightning round, just bunch of fun questions I try to ask and every interview. First one is, what is the best advice you've ever received and who gave it to you?

Heather Zempel ([42:13](#)):

So, uh, what has kind of become my life motto is the idea that success is not measured by the size of your organization or the number of people who hear you preach, but how well you've disciplined to the third and fourth generation. And that came to me via a mentor by the name of Dave Buring. And it was told to him when he was 19 years old by Lauren Cunningham, who's the founder of Youth with the Mission. This idea that just, yeah, give your life to discipleship. That's how your life and the success of your life will be measured.

Doug Smith ([42:43](#)):

Wow. Yeah. Is that your connection with Kent? We, we don't have to spend a lot time.

Heather Zempel ([42:47](#)):

Oh yeah, it is actually, Kent and I met at a lion cheer gathering. Yeah.

Doug Smith ([42:51](#)):

Beautiful. Yeah. Dave's Wonder Flat. I'm on the podcast as well. Love his heart. Um, if you could put a quote on a billboard for everyone to read, what would it say?

Heather Zempel ([42:58](#)):

Make someone's day. Just give your life every day to make someone's day.

Doug Smith ([43:02](#)):

Top books you give away maybe one or two that have greatly impacted you. Oh

Heather Zempel ([43:05](#)):

Gosh. Uh, practice of the presence of God by Brother Andrew. Making every moment of every day an opportunity for worship and prayer. I love books like Water From a Deep Well and church history and plain language. I think connecting the, the larger story that we're a part of in the Kingdom of God and exposing ourselves to different expressions of spiritual formation is really important. Uh, I love Jesus

through Middle Eastern eyes. It puts the words of Jesus into the world of Jesus. And context matters, uh, anything by Lindsay, the Heath Brothers, I love Range. That's kind of a new one I've read. And then, um, sorry, this is more than one or two. It's hard to ask for one

Doug Smith ([43:41](#)):

Or two. I well look at the library behind you. Yeah, yeah.

Heather Zempel ([43:44](#)):

I Right, right. I, I believe every person should read The Chronicles of Narnia all the way through at least three times in their lives. One is a, is a child, once is a young adult, and once is an older adult because you see different things in those stories every time you read them.

Doug Smith ([43:59](#)):

Really, really good. I'm, I'm taking my oldest daughter through it right now. It's a lot of fun. I

Heather Zempel ([44:03](#)):

Love it. So I think I just gave you like 12 books when you asked for two

Doug Smith ([44:07](#)):

<laugh>. I love, we'll include links to every one of them in the show notes. <laugh>, we'll get our team on that. Uh, alright, you guys spend time with a lot of leaders. I'm curious, uh, do you have a go-to question that any time you get to spend time with someone you ask,

Heather Zempel ([44:19](#)):

Uh, I like to ask, how did you get started? What do you love most about what you do? Uh, what what accomplishment were you most proud of by the time you were in the sixth grade? And if you could go to any concert in the history of the world, what would it be?

Doug Smith ([44:33](#)):

<laugh>. All right. Well I usually ask the question back to the guest. I'll, I'll go with the last one just cuz let's give you fun. What's, if you can go to any concert, what would you go to?

Heather Zempel ([44:42](#)):

Oh my gosh. I would go to Johnny Cash Live at Folsom. Now the problem with that is twofold. I'd have to be a guy and be in prison, but, uh, would love to be there for the energy and just the, the raw talent, uh, of, of that concert.

Doug Smith ([44:59](#)):

What's your biggest leadership pet peeve?

Heather Zempel ([45:03](#)):

Uh, uh, I, I, I hate critique when it's not the right time.

Doug Smith ([45:08](#)):

Hmm.

Heather Zempel ([45:08](#)):

I love critique. There's a time and, but when it's coming at the wrong time, that, that's a little annoying to me. Another one that's kind of granular, I hate on Excel documents when people don't use word wrap and, and the text just goes off the line. I, I hate that <laugh> <laugh>.

Doug Smith ([45:25](#)):

Uh, I have no idea if I do that or I'm guessing. I probably do. Yeah. So that's awesome. Uh, I don't know if it's a requirement of Nnc Sears. I'm imagining just knowing Mark's work that everyone has a bucket list. Um, yes. But even if, even if you don't, uh, what's something you've done in your life, an experience that you think everyone should do before they die?

Heather Zempel ([45:43](#)):

Gosh, I, I'm a big bucket li like, I have a bucket list for every year. So I'm, I'm a's go a big bucket list creator, me too and Maker, and I make everybody do those. I one of the things that I think every Christian should do, uh, as they have opportunity and are able, is to study the Bible in the lands of the Bible. And I don't mean just going on kind of a tourist trip, but the kind of of trip where you go with a community of people and someone that walks through the scriptural story in context of that world because you read it completely differently. So I, that's something I would encourage everybody to do as they're able.

Doug Smith ([46:22](#)):

What's one big thing on your list for this year?

Heather Zempel ([46:25](#)):

Oh my gosh. Um, well, I, I just went back to school, so, so finishing classes is, is actually, that's a big one. That

Doug Smith ([46:35](#)):

Might be the biggest

Heather Zempel ([46:36](#)):

One. That's one for this year. Just getting through that. Um, and then, uh, yeah, I, I've also started developing some goals that I do with my kid. So there's actually reading through the Chronicles of Narnia with her, she's a seven year old. That's one of the things on my list. And uh, and then this is coming up, this isn't this year, but I turned 50 next year and I think I wanna celebrate it at Disney World. So nice. <laugh>, that's one of those, let's go, you know, it's, that's just, that's leaning into my Enneagram seven in fun and has absolutely zero value add to the world or to my life other than just, it sounds like fun.

Doug Smith ([47:17](#)):

Fantastic. Uh, if you could have coffee with yourself at any age and you actually would've listened to yourself, what age would that be and what would you tell that version of Heather?

Heather Zempel ([47:25](#)):

I, I think probably, gosh, there's so many moments that I wish I could lean into my younger self, but eighth grade would probably be it. It was a moment when I was, it was definitely a chapter change in my life. Uh, and it was a time when I was beginning to make my faith my own and just being able to tell myself, Hey, relax, enjoy the journey. God's got this, God's got you. Just be fully present in whatever season you're in and be fully present with the people that are in your life at that moment. Uh, I think I could have benefited from hearing that.

Doug Smith ([48:01](#)):

Uh, and at the end of your life, what do you wanna be remembered for? What do you want your legacy to be?

Heather Zempel ([48:04](#)):

I, it's, it's, it's a couple of things. So that might be way too much to ask, but I wanna make disciples who make disciple makers, uh, that I I, if that could be said of me, I feel like I, I've done, uh, I've lived my life well and or if I've awakened a love of scripture for people, Hmm. Uh, just they, there there's something that I've said. There's something that I've taught that has caused people to dive into scripture for themselves. Uh, I I, I would love for that to have been said about me.

Doug Smith ([48:38](#)):

Anything else you wanna leave leaders with today?

Heather Zempel ([48:39](#)):

I'd say keep going. You've got this, God's got this, God's got you. Uh, what you're doing is making a difference. It's adding value. Uh, push through the challenges, the difficulties, the pain. Um, cuz it's worth it.

Doug Smith ([48:55](#)):

Well, Heather, I've loved this conversation. You actually remind me of my wife's aunt who loves God and this is so much fun. Any gram seven as well. So <laugh>, thanks for making this a blast, but also thanks for going deep. Love it. Uh, this was so rich in the content, so thanks for everything you do. Well, leader, thank you so much for listening to my conversation with Heather. I hope that you enjoyed it as much as I did. You can find ways to connect with her and links to everything that we discussed in the show [notes@lthreeleadership.org](mailto:notes@lthreeleadership.org) slash 3 59. Well, hey, leaders, always, I wanna challenge you that if you wanna 10 x your growth this year, you need to either launch or join in L three Leadership Mastermind group. Mastermind groups have been the greatest source of growth in my life over the last seven years.

Doug Smith ([49:31](#)):

And if you don't know what they are, they're just simply groups of six to 12 leaders that meet together on a consistent basis for at least one year in order to help each other grow, hold each other accountable and to do life together. So if you're interested in learning more about launching or joining a group, go to [L3leadership.org/masterminds](http://L3leadership.org/masterminds) or email me at [dougsmith@l3leadership.org](mailto:dougsmith@l3leadership.org). And as always, leader, I'd like to end every episode with quote, how quote Christine Kane who said this, she said, as a leader, you grow when you prioritize your character development over the need to always express your gift. That is so good. I'm gonna say it again. As a leader, you grow when you prioritize your character development



over the need to always express your gift. So good. Christine, well Leader, again, hope you enjoyed this episode. Know that my wife, Laura, and I love you. We believe in you and we say it every episode. But don't quit. Keep leading the world desperately needs your leadership. We'll talk to you next episode.