

Doug Smith: 0:35

Hey, leader, and welcome to another episode 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, and today's episode is brought to you by my friends at BearTongueAdvisors. We also recorded this episode live from the new returncom studio. If you're new to the podcast, welcome. I'm so glad that you're here and I hope that you enjoy our content and become a subscriber. Know that you can also watch all of our episodes over on our YouTube channel, 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 if you'd leave us a rating and review on Apple Podcast or Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. That really does help us to grow our audience and reach more leaders, so thank you in advance for that. Well, leader, in today's episode you'll hear my conversation with Dr Asa Lee, who is the president of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and in our conversation you'll hear Dr Lee talk about how building Lego sets can impact your leadership. You'll hear him talk about the lessons that he's learned from the seminary's most famous alumni, Mr Rogers, why presence and leadership matters, and so much more. But before we dive into the conversation, just a few announcements. This episode of the L3 Leadership Podcast is sponsored by Beratung Advisors. 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 at Beratung Advisors. 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 SIPC. Beratung Advisors, LPL Financial and L3 Leadership are separate entities. I also want to thank our sponsor, Henne Jewelers. They're a jewelry 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 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, and we just love that. So if you're in need of a good jeweler, check out HenneJewelers. com. And I also want to thank our new sponsor, 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 Reiturn. com to learn more. That's R-E-I-T-U-R-Ncom. If anything involves risk, please consult the Return offering circular if you're interested in investing. And with all that being said, let's dive right in. Here's my conversation with Dr Asa Lee. Dr Aisalee, it is an honor and a privilege to have you on the podcast. I've been looking forward to this for a long time. People won't have context for this, but we're just joking. This has been the most rescheduled podcast in L3 leadership history. I just really appreciate your

graciousness with my reschedules. But for those who may not be familiar with you, can you just kind of give us an overview of who you are and what you do?

Dr. Lee: 3:24

Certainly. Thanks, Doug. I'm the president of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. It's hard to describe what a seminary president does, but in essence I'm the equivalent of a university president or a high school principal or, in some cases, some days, a church pastor, all in one.

Doug Smith: 3:46

I certainly want to dive into all those things, but give us a little bit of context of your leadership background and what got you to where you are today.

Dr. Lee: 3:54

Yeah, so I am originally from the Washington DC area and served first spent in public school education and then went from public school education into ministry and served in ministry for a number of years and then into the academy, into the classroom, and then sojourned into higher ed administration, first as a dean, then as a sort of vice president of operations and administration, and then, in 2021, came up here to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and took the presidency here. So it's been a very interesting journey of first sort of an educator, then a pastoral leader, then a pastoral educator, and then a higher ed administrator. And then, you know, here we are.

Doug Smith: 4:45

Yeah, I'm always curious, you know, I'm sure calling had a part to play in this, but I'm always curious why people choose the fields that they do. And so can you just tell us, you know, why did you choose to go the higher ed route, the ministry routes, and why do you think that can make the greatest impact from your life?

Dr. Lee: 4:59

Yeah, so I was. I tell people I didn't choose ministry, ministry chose me. I first heard the call to ministry when I was 13 years old, and it was an audible call in the sense that I you know, I was in junior high and kind of turned around when I heard the voice of what I now understand is the spirit of God to say you know, you're going to pastor my people and I kind of turned around to see what that was about. I grew up in church so I knew what that meant. So that meant I spent the next 10 years running from that very thing. You know it was very clear. I don't want to be a part of that. That's not what I want to do. I understand them every Sunday and they get a lot of flack and it's not that's what I want to do. I did want to be an educator. I did enjoy sort of a one of the most. One of. One very pivotal moment for me was being asked to explain a lesson in a class, in a music class, and I remember vividly and still to this day. This is the thing that always gets me

excited is the look on people's faces when they get it Right, and it's a contact high. It's just an incredible experience to see people whether that's Bible study, life lessons, sitting at a meeting, when you people start nodding their heads and they start getting it or you give them a concept that they've never received before. I remember as a kid having that experience and ever since then I was like I want to be part of that journey for folks. So I always wanted to be an educator, didn't ever want to be a pastor, and so I went to school to be a music educator. I was a musician and studied to be a music teacher and was a music teacher for a short period of time and really enjoyed that. But when I was about 24 and graduated from 23 graduated from college and gotten a job and was working in a church and teaching and that voice came back from the age of 13 and said you've played enough, it's time. And I have to say it was time it was time for that. And so both worlds kind of had merged. So I fall in love with the pastoral ministry and the idea of leading people to a better vocational sense of who they are in God and being able to give themselves to God for the work of ministry. But then also you still get to educate folks and you still get to see that bright light happen in their eyes, and so the last 10 or plus years in theological education means I've been able to live both of these things together in a very exciting way. So I enjoy what I do.

Doug Smith: 7:52

Wow. One thing I want to take a side trail on is you talked about hearing the voice of God when I think you said you were 13 years old. This is a leadership podcast. We have people of faith, people not of faith, but I think a lot of times it's interesting I say similar things like I felt like God dealt with my heart. And so many times I have leaders come up to me and say how do you actually know God spoke to you? And I'm just curious in the way you describe it to people. If someone's trying to discern or hear God's voice, what would your advice be to them seeking out God's will for their life?

Dr. Lee: 8:24

Well, I think one of the most important things is and we miss this sometimes in the American expression of Christianity, especially in American church is that we do think. We often sometimes think we're supposed to go on and go at it alone. But faith, living a life of faith, is not a lonely proposition. It's actually a communal proposition. The biblical record is countless examples of people working in community. Even Jesus calls a community together to carry out the God's mission. So I think part of what we have to recognize is God put the people in our lives. That helps to surround us with sort of acts of confirmation, challenge, hope, encouragement, reprimand. All of that is important so you may hear something or you may discern something or you may sense something. But then also there's the moment where somebody else comes to you and says you are what you know, they give you a statement or something like that. In my case people have been calling me Reverend Lee since I was a kid because I talk with my hands a lot. You'll see that Right. So you know their pictures of me as a kid like. I have this vivid

picture of me on one of those play telephones at like three years old and I've got I'm doing this and I look like a preacher, right, so they called me Reverend Lee. Well that, you know, when I was ordained, my mother told the story to the church about how a great aunt christened that and saw that in me at a very young age. Right, so community matters. Once I announced the call, the acceptance of my call in my life, the church that I was serving at the time as a minister of music, one woman in the choir said when I said, you know, I'm called to preach and I was crying all kinds of stuff, and she looked at me and said oh, we've known that for years, right, so community helps to affirm sort of where you're going on this, so you don't have to do this alone, is my point.

Doug Smith: 10:22

Yeah, I guess. On that note, I guess I would be curious because it's a community is one of our core values at L3. Leadership we believe no leadership ever do life alone, but in community for all the reasons that you just mentioned. But yet you know, statistically I saw a stat I think Henry Cloud shared that he believes about 80% of leaders, when asked, said they don't have one person that they can confide in in their leadership journey. And you've obviously grown into a significant leadership role. I get to interact with a lot of pastors and I know that could be a lonely world. I'm just curious, you know, at your level, how do you seek out intentional community that can continue to Sharpen you and not, you know, I know a lot of times leaders actually the higher they go up, the more their their paranoid. They're afraid people take advantage of them or not. I'm just curious how do you Intentionally pursue community in this season of your life?

Dr. Lee: 11:12

you know it's funny because I'm often quoted to say I don't want any new friends. But you know, I keep running into people who are of like-mind and I we're drawn. You know, like, like is drawn into like in that, in that regard. And so I don't necessarily seek out, because I do have a core group of friends who are positioned in Places of their own leadership and we can come together and talk about and pray for each other and do all the things that kind of edify each other, without sort of the competition or the fear of what have you. And so I don't seek out folks. However, the way this job works is that you run into people who are of like-mind and in so doing, what are some of the attributes? Are they courageous? Are they? Do they speak their minds? Are they willing to be held accountable? Are they willing to hold me accountable? Are they not intimidated by, you know, stature or money or all these things? Are they true, genuine people? Are the people of integrity. And you know, when you start adding all those filters, you know I got a core group of people. That's why I say no, no new friends. It's rare that people make it through all of those things, but when they do, then you're able to share yourself in ways that that you know the job is lonely, right, the leadership in your context is always lonely, but being able to rely on others in that, in those, in those In your, in your personal life and in even your professional life, means that you have

places that kind of sharpen the iron that you, you bring to the table. So yeah, though those are kind of my attributes, I look for people I can share myself with and I willing to share themselves with me.

Doug Smith: 12:58

Yeah, thank you for sharing. I think that the filtering process is good. I never really thought of it through that lens, but I guess I kind of naturally do that, but putting verbiage to it. That's so you talked about. You start off really as a teacher, but then you started growing in leadership and started having leadership roles, which requires a lot of growth. You know people don't understand. They see people sitting in your seat and think, oh, you just magically got there. I'm always anxious to ask leaders what you know, what are some of the prices that you've had to pay, or maybe things that you've had to Grow through in order to lead at the level you're leading today?

Dr. Lee: 13:32

That, I mean that's a really great question. You know, there's always the price that we pay for balancing our families right, you know, be in order to you make sacrifices with your family, and I'm grateful for my wife, who was also a pastor, but we have four daughters and that that means that there are a lot of four daughters of still school age, and so that that means that there are a lot of different dynamics going on. But I'm grateful to her that she, she supports the journey I've been on. But that means I'm not at every soccer game, that means I'm not In, you know, in spaces and places. That helps all the time I do the best I can, but I'm grateful for for that kind of sacrifice. The other, the other, is that I haven't been able to Chart a kind of trajectory that some, you know, all of my friends have been able to. I mean, I spent, you know, much of my 20s serving churches, and so I was a pastor, and you know, pastors don't get to do things that a lot of other people get to do in their 20s, and so, you know, I have no regrets about that. It's just in the acknowledgement that you know, I've taken a different path and that means how I relate to others can be lonely or different, and In many respects I present a lot older and more mature than I. Then I am for people because I've had to grow up quickly. I started working in churches when I was 16 years old, so that meant I needed to comport myself with the level of maturity to be able to achieve things. Those are prices that I, you know, I knew, I Knew I had to pay, which is why, in part, I ran for so long. Right, these are. These are kind of the things that I knew I was gonna get in, get challenged by, so I wouldn't change anything about that. But it's just an acknowledgement that those are some of the key prices I had to pay.

Doug Smith: 15:27

Yeah, well, four girls school age. I have four kids, two boys, two girls. I gotta ask you know I love asking leaders what are you learning in this season of parenting to be a good parent?

Dr. Lee: 15:38

The beauty of children young children is that they always give you perspective, right, you know, no matter how difficult your day has been, if the most important thing is my bologna sandwich fell on the floor and lunch and it ruined my day, it puts every other issue in perspective, right, and so being able to always come home to, to people whose worlds are not your world and they're not intentionally selfish about it, it's just. Children are naturally self-centered because that's who they are, you know. That means you're always brought, drawn into the world, and that's actually refreshing for me when I have to deal with, you know, complex issues of budgeting, or who are going to hire, or what is this going to be. It's really quite simple make a better sandwich, right? Or? Or? Or do the thing, daddy, that you did, you fill out the permission slip. Those are the things that matter. So I'm grateful for the humility that children bring in our lives, especially in this season where I think all of us, as parents of young children post COVID, are all kind of figuring out the shifting sands of what it means to be a parent in this day and age.

Doug Smith: 16:55

So are you still mastering the art of making a sandwich, or have you, if you got that down?

Dr. Lee: 17:00

I'm an excellent sandwich maker, you know.

Doug Smith: 17:05

Make a better sandwich. That's so fine I get to see. Come on, daddy.

Dr. Lee: 17:11

Yeah.

Doug Smith: 17:12

I want to talk a little bit about leadership and researching this. You know I've read articles and listened to a few other things that you were on and one thing you said. You said Presence and availability are hallmarks of of your leadership style. I think that's beautiful, but I would love to hear you talk more about that.

Dr. Lee: 17:27

Yeah, when you're, when you're in a chief executive, you know the corner office is often the most distant office in the in the organization, right? So you got to go through layers

and gatekeepers to get there, and so, to the extent possible and this takes courage of the leader, which I can talk about later but you know, in this day and age, a lot of our institutions are going through transitions and changes, and so being a present and available, available leader means coming out of the office and Not sort of walking the halls stalking people. But you know, what does it mean to kind of sit in the courtyard of our campus, for example, and that's where I respond to emails or I'm taking lunch when I'm available in the cafeteria with next to students, right? What does it mean to Keep the door open so that anybody that just drops in has an opportunity to have five minutes with the president? What, what difference can that do in your organization in terms of the ability of transparency and organizational management? Certainly, there are things that you can't talk about because of propriety or what have you, but there are a lot of things you can talk about, and so learning to be able to, to balance, sort of being present when you need to be, but also being available. This is an important value that I learned as a pastor. It costs nothing for you to spend five minutes Shaking some hands and and being at the beginning of an event, or being at the end of an event and and seeing folks. How many emails can you avoid by spending five minutes saying hello to folks? And that just saves a lot of time and a lot of energy. But it also gives you a constant check-in to say you know the energy in this meeting doesn't feel right and this wasn't my meeting, but I know what to ask when I have my cabinet meeting later on, right?

Doug Smith: 19:22

Is everything okay in the institution? Is everything?

Dr. Lee: 19:24

all right with that what's happening over here. So temperature checking is a key, key part of that presence, because if you're, if you're present, then you're also Making yourself available in some way.

Doug Smith: 19:35

I love that we were just talking, you know, before we jumped on the call. You're getting ready for your fall board meeting. You talked about the budget. You know all the fun stuff involved with leadership that people want to do when they're in their 20s. A lot of pressure comes with leadership. I'm just curious how do you personally deal with the pain and pressure and stress that comes with your job?

Dr. Lee: 19:55

So I have various different outlets. You know what I'm known for is in my office. Here you can't see anything at the moment but my office. Here I have Lego bricks and Lego sets everywhere. So you know, over here on my bookshelf is a Sydney Opera House and a tower bridge and over here is a four foot model of a Titanic. That was my summer

project last year. I mean, I have that's. You know, legos are an important leadership kind of thing. They always remind me. Legos always remind me. You know, I grew up at a time when Legos were. You bought a box of Legos and they were all just a bunch of Legos. They didn't have any instructions. You built what was over on the box. You just kind of threw them together. You built what was on the box. Nowadays they've got complex. You know builds and all the other good stuff. But what I learned early on is you know the bricks. You can only build with the bricks. With the bricks that you have, you can't, you can't. You know, if you need a circle and you have squares, you're not going to get to a circle. You got to figure out you know how do you build with the bricks that you have. So you know, one of my outlets is if I cannot finish, if I'm working on a big project or I got some big thing going on. Building a Lego build is very tactile, practical, I've accomplished something for the day, right. So I got an outlet like that. Another outlet is I garden. I do a lot of gardening, vegetable gardens, and you know tomatoes, squash, cabbage, potatoes, all sorts of things. So working in the soil again very tactile, being able to do this. I spend a lot of time working on tactile kinds of things which you can do a thing in a short period of time and you can walk away from that thing and say I accomplished something, and so those are. Those are things that keep me sort of de-stressed in that way, because if I can, if I can do those things, then I feel like I'm accomplished. But I'm also, while you're doing those things, working on those complex issues that you've got to deal with on a on a regular basis. So I have several outlets like that.

Doug Smith: 22:05

Yeah, I love that. I remember in 2008, I went to a conference with Rick Warren say. He told leaders you need to divert daily, withdrawal weekly and abandon annually, but the divert daily which you're living this out. He basically just said if you work with your mind all day, you need to do something with your hands and he actually mentioned gardening. But I love the Lego thing. Do you have a random question? Do you have any bucket list Lego builds that you're like, hey, I know what I'm doing next year and the year after, like what's next?

Dr. Lee: 22:30

So the one of my bucket list was the Titanic. So I did that and so I was like a big, big deal and I was just giddy when it was done. The other is the Concorde that just came out. There's a set that that. That is the Air France Concorde or British Airways Concorde. So I'm going to. That's probably going to be next summer. I made it a habit. I've been in theological education in one form or another for 18, almost 18 years Now, and so when I started teaching about 10 years ago, I every year at the end of the academic year I would either be gifted or I would go and buy a Lego set. So you know, the Eiffel Tower or the Concorde is going to be next year's. It's a five foot tall, four and a

half foot tall Eiffel Tower thing. So I have no places to put these things. That's the problem.

Doug Smith: 23:29

I was going to ask is your wife like you bring these home and put?

Dr. Lee: 23:33

No, that's why they're my office in my conference room upstairs. I can't have them at home.

Doug Smith: 23:39

That's wonderful. You mentioned that these are outlets for dealing with stress, and I also love asking leaders just what they do to incorporate rest or Sabbath into their life, just because, especially nowadays, with all the mental health issues going down, I mean, leaders just go so hard for so long without taking a breaks. Do you have any rhythms of rest or Sabbath in your life?

Dr. Lee: 23:59

So one is and I, you know, like most leaders are, when it comes to rest, I'm not good at it. You know I try to take I'll press hard for every, you know four to six weeks. You know kind of just kind of push through with some stuff and then try to use a week on week seven to power down in some way or another, whether that is, you know, some golf or you know, just not in the office, or double down with family time, that kind of stuff. Again, that rhythm is difficult, depending on when that seventh week falls, but I try to be able to do that. You know, for example, the we're in the midst of the push leading up to the board meeting, but week seven comes after the board, after the board meeting is done, and I'll be in San Antonio for a little bit and I'll be in Atlanta and then Thanksgiving and that kind of stuff. So that's, that's one important aspect of that. So the other is it takes me about 10 days to really power down, right. So this idea that I can take a week vacation and I'm good, that's no. If I'm going to really power I need two weeks back to back. So the first week it takes about four days just to learn the deep program, grabbing my phone every five minutes to check emails, right. And then about week, about week one is done. I'm now in the position where I can actually rest and then week two is beneficial. So you know, taking two weeks at a time as opposed to one week is an important learning that I that I developed over the years.

Doug Smith: 25:30

When you really want to power down all together, my wife and I started implementing that a few years ago and, yeah, I absolutely agree with you that week to get unwound and then actually be able to rest is is huge. Another one of your responsibilities as a

leader is is culture voting your sponsor for the culture organization. I'll just leave it open ended. What have you learned about building great cultures?

Dr. Lee: 25:53

Cultures are maintained, built and sustained by people, so choosing the right people. One of my one of one bit of advice that was most important for me as a leader coming up was choosing. The most important thing you do as a leader is choosing who's going to be in your team, and that's important, because who you choose on your team helps to build the culture you want to have Right, and so, conversely, cultures are maintained. Toxic cultures and other cultures are maintained by people as well. The challenge often, though, is if you inherit an old culture like in the case of Pittsburgh Seminary, which is 230 years old you cultures are often maintained by people. Some cultures are created by people who are gone, and therefore people maintain a culture that no one is invested in anymore. That's what you get statements like We've always done it that way, but nobody knows why we do it that way, and nobody knows who's servicing who to do it, continue to do it that way, and so you sometimes have to fight ghosts. I like to say you have to spend time sort of speaking to the zombies that are walking around, that nobody knows what's going on, but the system was put in place by somebody who's been dead for 30 years, but yet we still do this thing. Does it work? No, well then, having the right people present means you can begin to change the culture more rapidly, because they're willing to do something else. That's hard work, because mining a culture means really getting into the minds of people and understanding why people do what they do there. Culture is not sort of this amorphous thing that just kind of happens. It's maintained by people, and people get something from the culture. So you've got to be able to navigate that as well.

Doug Smith: 27:59

Did you have that experience where you inherited an old culture and had to change? Was that difficult for you and how did you change if you did?

Dr. Lee: 28:06

Yeah, so Pittsburgh Seminary is a Presbyterian Seminary. I am not Presbyterian. I am also the first African-American and the youngest president in the school's history, so I check a lot of new boxes here. So what that really means is I'm not invested in the things that others that have held this office have been because of their denominational connection, because of their longevity in certain spaces, so I get to come in and ask good questions. That's the advantage of being new in so many different ways. Okay, so tell me what this is again? And that kind of a gentle interrogation means things are changing and things are invited to be questioned. And what you actually discover is, if you give, as president, the space for questioning, then other people ask the good questions and then next thing you know everybody's like well, let's try something

different. And so this has been the journey we've been on at Pittsburgh for the last three years is questioning in not necessarily a bad way, but just simply interrogating everything to say does this work for us now? It worked for us then. Does it work for us now? It doesn't? Oh well, let's, let's do something different. And in many cases it's been the ghosts of our past that we've been running into to say well, you know, it was done by this person who was no longer here. Okay, great. Can we really do something different and can we imagine something different?

Doug Smith: 29:38

Yeah, have you found that in those instances where were changes necessary, how often do the people have to change? Versus by meaning bringing new people in who adopt a new culture because other people just can't make that transition to the new culture, versus being able to come in get people to make that change. I'm just curious what's your experience been?

Dr. Lee: 29:59

So you know this is this is probably some people call this a weakness or bias. I'm an educator at heart, so my default is always that people will learn and change if they're teachable. Right. And you know, I got to say we haven't had we've not had nearly as much turnover as I thought we would in positions. The challenge is you've got to be patient, you've got to be willing to to, and, frankly, sometimes you can't be patient. Sometimes the changes happen right away. But you know, I've been. I've been afforded the luxury of being able to invite people to a different reality and inviting people to a different reality. I'm inviting them to think differently and inviting people to think differently. You didn't have to say, okay, I'll invite you to think differently and this is going to ask something different of you. And then here's a quick big piece Trust me, right. And so you know there's a lot of asks in there, but in in most cases, the community here has trusted me. When I first arrived here, the seminary was closed because it was in the middle of COVID and so there was no real activity going on at all. But we had promised. I arrived in June of 2021, but we promised by August of 2021, the seminary will be open and the campus would be available. But when I arrived there were no opening plans. There was no way to do any sort of, you know, pre screening or all the things that we got accustomed to back then. So I had done that work in my previous place and so I had to say to them pretty quickly you got to trust me and you got to think differently about this, and there were a lot of skeptics. But then we opened and we haven't had, you know, any sort of mass breakouts of any kind and so, okay, maybe this guy might be trustworthy here, right, but that's not to say that there hasn't been sort of the need to change some personnel, and that has had, has had to happen as well. And that's partly because, as I tell people, I invite people to change, I invite people to journey with

change, and sometimes they have to change outside of the institution. They can't do it here, and that's okay. We've got to learn to do that as well.

Doug Smith: 32:12

Yeah, talk to me a little bit about seminary. Obviously you're passionate about it. You lead one and you're responsible for really training and equipping people for ministry. You know why are seminaries important for those listening. You know why should they consider attending a seminary if they want to go into ministry?

Dr. Lee: 32:27

Yeah, seminaries are some of the world's first vocational schools, right In modern parlance, dating back to the late 18th, early 19th century, the I call them pastor factories. They were designed to be places where people who were interested in being pastors would come, get trained and go serve congregations. Pittsburgh seminary is no different. It just was founded, you know, when Western Pennsylvania was frontier country and this, this seminary, was founded in order to educate people for churches on the frontier. However, in the last 25, 30 years, with the decline of a lot of church attendance across you know, denominational life in many places, of people going to non-denominational churches in different communities, mainline traditional seminaries have been forced to change and they become less pastor factories and more vocational centers. And what I mean by that is if you're a person of faith and you want to use your faith as a way of enacting change in the world but you may you don't necessarily think you're called to be a pastor, you're not a pastor, but you may be a nonprofit person. You want to be a community organizer who uses faith. To be able to do that, seminaries are now retooling to be the places where you can learn Bible, you can learn communication, you can learn contextual analysis and urban ministry and all sorts of other kinds of creative ways of doing ministry and then go with certifications to go out and do that work. And so Pittsburgh Seminary is one of these places where that kind of activity is happening. You want to be a mission person, if you want to be an urban mission, urban ministry person, if you want to be someone that is doing creative work around youth and young adult ministry, this place is an example of that, where you're doing kind of credentialing in this way. So ministry is not anymore simply church pastoral ministry. Ministry is now sort of a broadening of that scope that provides a deepening and equipping to strengthen people's call on their lives, whatever they feel themselves to be.

Doug Smith: 34:36

Yeah, and I'm curious. Just you know I'm always looking for how leaders think about developing and equipping leaders. You know in your experience, even through seminaries etc. What have you found to be the best way to actually train people, disciple people to actually go out and do great things with their lives to make an impact?

Dr. Lee: 34:52

Yeah, I mean that's a great question because this is, this is kind of what my doctoral work was in. And that is it first requires when you're training folks. You got to do it in good communities and diverse communities, and what I mean by diverse is not sort of just surface level diverse in terms of skin color or gender, but I also I mean sort of inexperience, right. So even in the group that may be all male or female, you know the lived experiences. You may have somebody that's married, somebody that's divorced, somebody that's single. You may have somebody who has a kid, nobody right. All of those diversities matter because those life experiences, when you're trying to create a classroom environment or trying to create a learning environment, that kind of gentle, those gentle differences, become places where you're forced to identify who you are in relationship to somebody else, that that that does matter in the training and is being able to play and fail without consequence. This is a huge thing and especially when I do leadership training, I talk about our fear of failure, right. And there's the old story of WD 40. Like, why do you know what? Why is WD 40? Wd 40? Well, because the previous 39 formulas didn't work, and so it was 39 failures. And this is true. You go look up the 39 failures. The 40th one worked. What do we call it WD 40. And so that's the formula being able to create safe spaces where people can try out things and fail and then reflect on their failures is a really important place. So, whether that is preaching or sharing the gospel or relationship building for fundraising purposes, right, getting over those first jitters and creating a space of play, if you will, means I can learn from my mistakes and then I feel a little bit more confident when I'm going on that space. And then, lastly, real world real real world experience, moving from sort of the safe place to actually getting out there and doing something and processing it. As a faculty member in my previous institution in Washington DC, my classroom was on K Street. We had a classroom space on K Street downtown in Washington DC, and not many people outside of DC know this, but for a long time and even still the case, K Street by day is known as the lobbying center of DC, but by night it is one of the sex trafficking places in Washington DC. And so my students, as a part of their assignments on early on Sunday mornings, there was a church nearby and they were required to volunteer. One of their offices was to volunteer at that church early on Sunday morning, I mean like 6 am, and what they would discover is that that church had a recovery ministry and they would be volunteering in that space helping to give food and intervention work and all that kind of. And these were kids who were not all from cities, some of these kids were like rural Iowa or Oklahoma, and so seeing a sex worker in need with a social worker and a case worker and you there with a blanket and a cup of coffee, kind of doing wraparound intervention work, means whoa. This is not book learning we're just talking about. We're also talking about real lives being impacted and then coming back in the classroom and reflecting on that. Those are important parts of the kind of shaping for future leaders that

seminaries haven't done historically but absolutely this world needs leaders to be able to do.

Doug Smith: 38:45

Yeah, a little bit of a shift. You have a somewhat famous graduate of the seminary, Fred.

Dr. Lee: 38:50

Rogers, Mr Rogers, for those listening. Maybe people know them, right?

Doug Smith: 38:54

Yeah, and he certainly didn't invent the word neighbor, but he did make it pretty popular in our culture and obviously Jesus talked a lot about loving your neighbor. I'll just leave this really open-ended and certainly share any lessons that you learned from Fred, but what do you think about the theology of neighbor and how should we think about that in loving our neighbor?

Dr. Lee: 39:16

Yeah. So we've been on this journey here at the seminary to kind of enact in a pedagogical and a methodological way some of the lessons that Mr Rogers taught all of us. He's a 1961 graduate of the seminary and a lot of people know, that Fred was a minister. They knew that he may have been an ordained minister, but they didn't know he actually went to seminary and in talking to people in his world who worked with Fred, they say his seminary education really refined and honed his idea of the show. And so some of the takeaways for us is Fred was teaching gospel lessons without ever using gospel or Jesus. He embodied and was the real deal of what it means to be a community and what does it mean to be in a community and be a part of a neighborhood. And so the important part of being a neighbor and a theology of neighbor is to recognize that all of us live in some kind of neighborhood. Pittsburgh is a city of neighborhoods, but also we're in global neighborhoods. We are in national conversation with each other and the neighborhoods have sort of general requirements of each other. Right, whether that is the golden rule in a religious sense or it's in a secular sense, just simply, hey, can you keep an eye out for the package on my doorstep? Or hey, what happens to my house can happen to your house. So we got to keep a lookout for each other. Those things matter, and being able to recognize that the demands on being a neighbor are not religious, they are communal, they are shared, and God creates and sustains us in and through our communities and therefore we're all kind of in the possibility of being neighbors one to another. And so, as a seminary, we're working through how can we be a neighbor, a place that reforms, forms and sustains this idea of neighbor, both in a religious context, but more specifically in a communal context one

with another. And being a good neighbor as an institution has a whole other kind of dynamic to it.

Doug Smith: 41:45

Wow, a little bit more about leadership. Part of your job is fundraising. I've been fundraising for 13 years. Fun, fun, best fundraising tips. What have you learned about it?

Dr. Lee: 41:58

Be relational, be yourself, be relational. The ask is not as important as the relationship. That last one kind of feels counterintuitive. But a good relationship means you'll get to the ask. But if you don't have a relationship with someone, you'll never get the ask. Additionally, being able to tell your story to multiple audiences is always an important part of fundraising, and that is you're never just talking to the person who's sitting in front of you, you're talking to all the various audiences they represent as well, because if you have a good relationship with someone, you also have the potential for them to be their base relational person to someone else and to introduce you to the next person that can breathe that. So I value relationships more than anything else. I have a fundraising person who's dynamic. He's really great. He's always looking for me to tell him what to do and my response to that is you tell me who to talk to. This is because everybody wants a relationship with the president. If they don't want a relationship with the president, they may want a relationship with the institution. We are fortunate to be a well-endowed institution, which means it has a different problem, which is my job in fundraising means why do you need the money? You've got money. What do you need more money for? So the relational piece is becoming an important part of you want to be a part of what we're doing here not just giving but you want to be a part of our experience of being a part of PTSD. So those are some of the quick tips that I'd give.

Doug Smith: 43:40

Love it. So I read that you have a proven track record for advancing equity, diversity and inclusion in a seminary setting. Obviously, this is becoming more and more important to leaders everywhere, as it should be. What advice do you have for others when it comes to advancing this as well?

Dr. Lee: 43:57

So I've had lots of great experiences doing diversity equity work. One of my best experiences was working with the Arlington County Fire Department in Arlington, Virginia, during COVID. I was just a citizen of Arlington County and they got wind of my work at the seminary at the time and in communities around this issue, and the chief of fire chief sought me out and we were able to train 300-plus firefighters on diversity equity work in a non-threatening way. And you don't think firefighters don't need this

kind of stuff. They depend on each other, but actually they did, and some of the most diverse experiences I've ever had happened with those firefighters. But for me, we miss something when we do this diversity work without bringing in the theological aspect, and so my approach is often to say the diversity work that we say we're called to is not just because of legal requirements or because it's the thing of the day or it's something we ought to do. This is about human dignity. This is about being created in the image of God and therefore all of us have a little bit of God's light in us, and so what that means is respecting each other and seeing each other not as monolithic but as a diversity that God has represented in all of these different people. And so then, how do we build diversity as a question of human dignity and appreciating the experiences of each other, what those things are? You can't get that from a legal perspective, you can't get that from a sort of a philosophical ideology, but you've got to live with these people in your community or on your job or in these places, and so being able to understand what makes them tick makes you a better person and vice versa, and it makes the organization function better. And so those are the kinds of things and it was most acute with these firefighters when you ask them non-threatening questions, and we only asked them three questions Tell us something about your upbringing, where did you come from, why are you a firefighter and what's your experience of race? Only one of those three questions was an experience of race question, right, but the kinds of stories that were being talked about were personal stories about who they are, and you got to choose how you answer that question. But in answering that question, your fellow firefighters understood what made you tick, and then, so doing, points of conversation, points of disagreement were illuminated in ways that help people to understand who they are. So those are the kinds of things that I did in the classroom, the kinds of things I did in the seminary environment. It's the kind of things we're doing here at Pittsburgh Seminary. I just think a lot of those legal trainings that we have to go through, or the diversity trainings that we experience, loses sight of those kinds of nuances and simplistic engagement around simply being human with each other.

Doug Smith: 47:15

Yeah, no, I love that. I think I heard Fred Rogers say I quote this all the time. I heard him mess it up. It's like there's a person you couldn't learn to love if you just heard their story.

Dr. Lee: 47:24

And I just love that.

Doug Smith: 47:25

Those three questions, I mean, that's basically all it is. It's just people sharing stories and yeah, that's beautiful. I haven't heard those three questions, so thank you for sharing that. With a few minutes we have left, I want to dive into the lightning round

bunch of fun questions I ask in every interview, and the first one is what is the best advice you've ever received and who gave it to you?

Dr. Lee: 47:44

Again, I think I said it earlier great bit of advice from a. He was the board chair of my seminary time. Now he's a bishop in Florida. Be careful who you choose to be on your team, because the most important thing you do as a leader is choose who's on your team.

Doug Smith: 48:00

Come on, if you could put a quote on a billboard for everyone to read, what would it say?

Dr. Lee: 48:04

Think.

Doug Smith: 48:08

That's one of the best answers I've heard. Beautiful, maybe, hey, maybe we can raise a little bit of money and put that up. Just think, what's a book that you've read either in the last year or all time that's significantly impacted you, that you recommend most often.

Dr. Lee: 48:27

Bernay Brown's Dare to Lead was a really great text Came out a couple years ago. I read it as a part of a class I was teaching on courageous leadership and really thoughtful set of values plus strategies, plus stories, that kind of welded together sort of my core commitment of being what other leader is.

Doug Smith: 48:51

Outside of your growing Lego collection. What's something that people may not know about your journey that they should know?

Dr. Lee: 48:58

I was a gigging musician. I was a piano player. Thursday nights I was a piano bar, friday was nightclub, saturday was bar mitzvahs and Sunday was church. So I was yeah, I was the real deal.

Doug Smith: 49:14

Do you have a favorite failure that led to a success or a valuable lesson?

Dr. Lee: 49:19

I remember seeking this job at a community college to be a faculty member. There I was like, if I make it here, I am set, I am done. I was a shoe in for the job, the chair of the department. I was their favorite candidate. I was lined up to be the person and the provost soaked in and nixed the job and gave it to somebody else. And that failure well, them to choose me was the best thing that could ever happen, because that started me. They got me going back to school, finished my doctorate and then got me back into the seminary education and kind of accelerated the next steps. Had I not been hired in that job, my life would be very different, right now.

Doug Smith: 50:04

Wow, it's funny how things work out. You had spent time with a lot of leaders and I'm just curious you know, when you get to spend time with someone that you look up to and admire, do you have a go-to question that you always ask?

Dr. Lee: 50:17

My usual question is because I'm around faith leaders a lot of times, so my usual question is what does the gospel of Jesus Christ mean to you?

Doug Smith: 50:27

Can you answer that for us?

Dr. Lee: 50:29

Yeah, for me, the gospel of Jesus Christ is life. It is, it is liberative, and it is the ever-imagined and creative story of how God liberates us from our own limited imagination, not just from sin, but also our own limited ways of thinking about this world.

Doug Smith: 50:48

You got that down, man, you were ready. Biggest leadership, pet peeve.

Dr. Lee: 50:54

The failure to make decisions. This could be a podcast all of itself. Everybody that I hire, I say the single most important thing that a leader does ship it all down. You make decisions. Even a bus driver who's the leader of a bus is going to go left or right or straight or back. You've got to make decisions, and leaders that don't make decisions I have no space for.

Doug Smith: 51:22

I don't know if you have an actual bucket list or not, but what's something you've done in your life that you think everyone should do before they die?

Dr. Lee: 51:29

I think you should see the sunset on the Atlantic Ocean. It gives you a different perspective.

Doug Smith: 51:39

If you could go back and have coffee with yourself at any age and you would have actually listened, what age would that be and what would you tell that version of Aisa?

Dr. Lee: 51:49

I think I'd probably be a freshman in high school. I think I was most open at that time. I would say to him think more broadly and try out more things. Much of my life was sort of I made my mind that I'm going to do this one thing. Looking back, if I had more options of four of them, if I'd taken more options, I may have chosen something different or not, but that's one thing that I think about often.

Doug Smith: 52:29

On the other end of your life. Looking back at the end, what do you want to be remembered for and what do you want your legacy to be?

Dr. Lee: 52:35

More than anything else, I'd love to be someone that was remembered to have integrity in the decisions that they made, that left the place better than how they found it, and that was able to provide for his family in a way that was long-term sustainability for them. Anything else you want to leave leaders with today, or anything else you want to talk about. No, this is great. Thanks for having me, Doug.

Doug Smith: 53:00

Yeah, Aisa, this has been great. Thanks again, and thanks for moving to Pittsburgh. We are blessed to have you here. Our city is better because of you, and it's been an honor to get to know you a little bit, even though I guess I'll never actually get to be one of your friends because you don't need it anymore. Fair enough. Thanks for your time today. I look forward to doing it again sometime.

Dr. Lee: 53:22

Thanks, Doug.

Doug Smith: 53:25

Well, leader, thank you so much for listening to my conversation with Dr Aisa Lee. I hope that you enjoyed it as much as I did. You can find ways to connect with him and links to everything that we discussed in the show notes at l3leadership.org. And as always, leader, I want to challenge you that if you want to 10x your growth this next year, then you need to either launch or join an L3 Leadership Mastermind Group.

Mastermind groups are 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. For me personally, mastermind groups have been the greatest source of growth in my life over the last eight years, which is why I believe everyone should be in one. And if you're interested in learning more about launching or joining a group, go to l3leadership.org or email me at Doug Smith at [l3leadership.org](mailto:info@l3leadership.org). And, as always, I like to end every episode with a quote, and I will quote Dwayne the Rock Johnson, and he said this. He said success isn't always about greatness, it's about consistency, and I love that. Well, leader, I hope you enjoyed the episode. Know that my wife Laura and I love you, we believe in you and I say it every episode. But don't quit, keep leading. The world desperately needs your leadership. We'll talk to you next episode.