Episode One: Spiritual Leadership in a Climate-changed World with Jessica David, Allen Ewing-Merrill, and Debra Coyman

Jessica David: Why have we let climate change get this far? What am I called to do in this time of turmoil and change? How on earth will I find time to even do my laundry this week? I'm Jessica David, a Harvard Divinity School student. I'm an intern at The BTS center, which basically means I ask a lot of questions. I'm really curious about The BTS Center's mission to cultivate spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world, because it seems really worthy and necessary. So I asked a huge question: Can I take over the podcast for a few months to learn more about what you do here? And. Well, here we are.

Welcome to the Climate-changed Behind the Scenes edition with me, Jessica David. I am excited to be here today with two of The BTS Center's leaders.

Allen Ewing-Merrill: I'm Allen Ewing-Merrill. I serve as Executive Director of The BTS Center. I'm also a pastor. I served churches in the Methodist tradition in Maine and Massachusetts for about 20 years. And over the years, I've also done a lot of organizing, especially organizing of faith leaders, and have been really engaged in advocacy and activism about a bunch of social justice issues.

Debra Coyman: And I'm Debra Coyman I'm the board chair of The BTS Center and in my eighth year of service on the board. I'm a retired business person with a background in strategy, finance and human resources. And I've done a lot of board service on a variety of other not for profits. And I'm a lay leader in my local UCC church.

Jessica David: What's a fun fact about you that most people might not know?

Debra Coyman: I hide this one. The summer after my junior year in college, I won the $10,000 pyramid. Everybody gives me quite a reaction when they hear that. Of course, now it's $100,000 pyramid, so inflation. I used it to buy contact lenses and pay for my first year of business school.

Allen Ewing-Merrill: Debra, that's amazing.

Jessica David: I have to ask, what is the $10,000 Pyramid?

Debra Coyman: It's a game show.

Jessica David: Okay, okay.

Debra Coyman: TV game show.

Allen Ewing-Merrill: I totally cannot beat that one. Debra. But one year when I was in seminary on New Year's Eve, it happened to be the New Year's Eve when we transitioned

from 1999 to 2000. So that was a big year. And I was in Times Square, and I was actually part of the official New Year's Eve confetti crew. So a bunch of friends and I spent that evening on the top of one of the giant buildings in Times Square, and we threw confetti at midnight out over Times Square from gigantic boxes of confetti.

Jessica David: That is amazing. What a legacy. I love that. Let's dive right in to the discussion.

So The BTS Center's tagline is spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world. Can I just say first, as far as taglines go, that packs a lot of power.

Allen Ewing-Merrill: Mm, yep.

Jessica David: So we're gonna explore that tagline in this conversation. And I wanna start with the last phrase, a climate-changed world. I assume you're using, you're intentionally using climate-changed here as an adjective.

Allen Ewing-Merrill: Absolutely. We say climate-changed. We put a D on climate change on purpose. And that's because we, we really want to communicate in kind of a provocative way that climate change is not scientist prediction of some imagined future. It is here, it is now. It's a defining current reality. And I think if you look around and pay attention, sea level rise, soaring temperatures, extreme storms, devastating floods in some places and equally devastating drought in other places, fires like the ones we saw on the west coast recently, species, species extinction, biodiversity loss. All of this is a reminder that climate change is real and it's here and our communities are feeling its effects.

Debra Coyman: Now, for me, the phrase captures the urgency of the situation. We are living amid the effects of climate change, and like the proverbial frog in the pot of water, we are not taking action to jump out of what will become boiling water.

Jessica David: I have to say, it really resonates with me. You all are the first, first organization I've encountered that uses climate-changed. And it took me a little while to figure out what you were really getting at there, but it's very powerful. So why spiritual leadership? All of the things that you just mentioned and talked about sound to me a lot like environmental or scientific problems. What is the role of faith communities?

Allen Ewing-Merrill: Scientists have been warning us about climate change for decades, and so we're always wrestling with this question, how did we get here? One thing that's clear is that, you know, the human demand on the natural world just exceeds Earth's regenerative capacity. We call that overshoot. We are extracting and we're consuming more than our biosphere can renew. And that all of that, of course, is set in motion by the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. So we wrestle with that, and we wrestle with this urgent question. Why haven't we, you know, we're one of the wealthiest, maybe the wealthiest country in the world. Why haven't we mobilized to address this, this existential threat that we're facing? Why do we keep doing the things that so obviously run against our own survival and our future flourishing? And so we think a lot about how the climate crisis is a symptom. It's a symptom of this bigger set of systems. You can think about extractive capitalism, think about the impacts of colonialism, about, about materialism. It's a symptom of this set of

mindsets, like the objectification of the natural world, like our, our interest in growth at all costs, our separation from our non human kin. I often quote this environmentalist named Gus Speth, who says, I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. And I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those. But he says I was wrong. I now believe the top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy. And he says in order to deal with these, we need cultural and spiritual transformation. And then he ends by saying we scientists don't know how to do that. This quote resonates for me because I think about the fact that selfishness, greed, and apathy, or cultural and spiritual transformation, these may not be within the purview of the science community, but they ought to be within the purview of the spiritual community. These ought to be things that we as faith leaders are thinking about. So when we say that the climate crisis requires spiritual leadership, we need to shift the way we see the world, rethink notions of human progress, rethink what it means to live, to live a meaningful life and commit to living in right relationship with each other, with God and with our more than human kin, and with the Earth. Also think about the ways in which the impacts of climate change show up not just in the weather or the soil or oceans. They show up in our communities. People are struggling. They're struggling with feelings of grief and anxiety and fear. They're asking big questions like what does this mean for me or for my family? What's going to happen in the future? They're asking like, am I a bad person if I get in an airplane? These are aspects of climate change that transcend science and technology. They raise these big spiritual questions and they require spiritual care.

Jessica David: Yeah, um, wow, when you put it that way, Allen, it makes complete sense to approach this as a spiritual issue.

Debra, I'm curious what makes this mission compelling to you? Being on the board.

Debra Coyman: I was on the board when we recruited Allen to take this role as the Executive Director of the Center. And at that point we had spent several years already exploring opportunities for our vision and mission. After ending the 200 year mission of being a degree granting seminary, the board did a lot of work to bring that chapter to an end. And I joined the board just after that work was completed. So we were experimenting with program design for clergy. There was a desire to build on the educational mission that had gone on for several centuries here in northern New England. Looking at equipping faith leaders for their roles at a time when, frankly, church decline was on everybody's mind. Allen came in and got his feet wet and found his office and the bathroom. And then he came to the board at a retreat. And I remember at the meeting he invited the board to consider focusing our mission on addressing climate change. He introduced that with that Gus Speth quote that he just gave you, which I love. Gus Speth was the head of the forestry school at Yale. He's a very well respected forester and scientist. He kind of said, look, this is beyond science, which I think is a very interesting place for us to build. So I had an immediate gut level response to Allen's suggestion and the importance of that idea and the, the possibilities associated with that idea. In the years since Allen I think it's been five, right? You're in, you're in beginning of year six here, is that right?

Allen Ewing-Merrill: I'm coming up at the end of six.

Debra Coyman: Oh my Lord, I've lost a year. Not surprising. The BTS Center really seeks to help faith leaders engage their communities in stewardship of God's creation, at the same time giving spiritual support for the increasing challenges that communities are seeing and the impacts of the attendant physical and political changes that we're facing. And we try to do this from an ecosystem perspective. It's not about us having the answers. It's about looking for partners, trying to understand the changing landscape of faith and the intersections of climate change across so many other areas of social justice, and looking for the ways that The BTS Center can add unique value. Personally, I'm a Christian who finds the sacred in nature. I experience God and the divine by spending time outdoors. And I feel a deep connection to all of creation. I feel a lot of grief over the loss of habitat for animals and plants and the ways human society tends to overrun and consume everything willy nilly.

Jessica David: So how did each of you come to understand climate change as an existential threat?

Debra Coyman: Jessica, that's an interesting question for me because I hadn't really thought about it before you asked it, but what came up for me, and maybe for some of the listeners is that Al Gore in 2006 with his An Inconvenient Truth tour opened my eyes to the problem and I was very interested in what he had to say. And I thought at that point that such a clear call to action from a respected member of world leadership would produce a response and we'd work to hold temperatures at the 1 1/2 degrees C that seemed to be the stopping point, the desired stopping point, and thus we'd mitigate the worst of the impact. In all the years since then, 20 years, we have discovered that there was no such luck on that. Al Gore's position triggered a fight over whether this was real or a hoax which hung on for a very long time even after the scientific consensus was that it was real. As I thought about that, I was really led to understand that our economic drivers and our systems and institutions are really aligned against addressing the crisis. Whether it's the focus on quarterly short term earnings that our capitalist organizations are driven by, or whether it's simply that we want to maintain our lifestyles rather than make the changes, the difficult changes that are required, particularly around pumping carbon into the atmosphere. We see the oil companies aligned against this, we see the banks, some of the big financial organizations aligned against this. And now we're approaching or maybe have already crossed some critical tipping points. The implications for food systems, for water, for the oceans and for life itself are frankly frightening to me.

Jessica David: I love talking about Al Gore. I was a political science undergrad in Washington D.C. during the end of the Clinton Gore administration and I had such a crush on him. And then when he came out with An Inconvenient Truth and he was up there doing his slideshow, I felt like it was a good moment for nerds.

Allen Ewing-Merrill: It's interesting to hear your story, Debra, and I don't think I've ever heard that. And it's also hard to believe that 2006 was almost 20 years ago. I'll just say that I'll confess that my wake up call really wasn't until really just about six years ago, around the time that I started at The BTS Center when I had a chance to study with Dr. Larry Rasmussen, who for many years taught social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He's one of the world's widely respected Christian environmental ethicists. One of the things that Dr. Rasmussen said that has really stuck with me is that all social justice is

derivative of climate justice. It's not that one is more important than another, it's just that social justice derives from climate justice in the sense that we can never have human flourishing on a dying and diminishing planet. So to the extent that the Earth is in trouble, we're all in trouble. And we're not in trouble equally because some of us have privilege and others do not. People who live in certain parts of the country, people who live in poverty, some people experience the impacts disproportionately. But to the extent that the Earth is in trouble, we're all in trouble.

Jessica David: That really resonates with me. But I hear you saying there, Allen is, or perhaps the way I'm interpreting it, some of us have had the privilege. You ignore this because we haven't had to face it and the impacts of climate change in as close and personal a way as some communities.

Allen Ewing-Merrill: Right. Some of us are sheltered from the worst impacts because of our privilege. But that, to me, means that we have the responsibility to really be thinking broadly about the common good and committing not just to our own prosperity, but to our collective flourishing.

Spiritual leadership sounds so, like, ethereal and lofty, but just to bring it down to Earth. You know, we're all spiritual beings. We're all trying to make meaning of our lives and of our world. So it's not just about religious institutions. Whether we're talking about traditional faith communities or beyond. Spiritual leaders can help to make meaning. They can craft ritual and tend to ritual. They can make space for complex emotional responses and vulnerability. Um, they nurture community. I would just say, you know, for the listener, I'm just going to boldly say that by virtue of the fact that you're listening to this podcast, you are a spiritual leader. Really want to define that broadly. Our faith traditions stored these deep reservoirs of meaning and practice, reservoirs of sacred meaning and resources that we desperately need in times of crisis and uncertainty, like the moments we're facing right now. Our faith traditions grow from these long lineages of ritual and practice. And my hope is that as we, as we navigate some of the really big and distressing challenges of our day, that we might turn again and again to these ancient resources, to these ancient traditions, to our sacred wisdom, and maybe, maybe see them in fresh ways and hopefully find that they can help us to meet this moment with courage and with creativity.

Jessica David: It feels almost countercultural to me, Allen, to hear you say that. I think when we talk about climate change, we so often talk about technology and innovation, invention of new things that are going to save us. And you're actually suggesting going backwards and really calling on ancient and old wisdom.

Allen Ewing-Merrill: Absolutely.

Jessica David: So the spiritual leaders that The BTS Center works with, these are not mostly church workers or ordained clergy, is that right?

Allen Ewing-Merrill: We do love ordained clergy. And yes, there's a lot of clergy who plug into our programs, but we really want to think of spiritual leadership broadly. So there are lots of people who are not ordained, at least not in the formal traditional sense, lay leaders,

people who are part of spiritual communities of one kind or another, including, I want to say, the spiritual but not religious communities. It's not just the traditional, you know, world religions, but thinking really broadly, leadership can be exercised in so many different ways. One of the really quickly growing areas of our programs is with chaplains. So these are people who are offering spiritual care in all the settings you can think of. Hospitals, prisons, the military, college and university settings, in workplaces, in the community, sometimes even in within movements like activist spaces. We offer programs that are helping them to increase their climate consciousness so that when they're offering care and someone brings a concern about the climate crisis, that they feel equipped to be able to respond in that moment. At some point in life, everyone needs spiritual care. So really, anyone who has a meaningful spiritual practice can be called on to make meaning or to offer care.

Jessica David: When I talk to my family and friends about my internship with The BTS Center, they sometimes look at me quizzically and tell me it sounds a little theoretical, theological, philosophical. So help me make it a bit more concrete, especially for my mom and dad. What difference can spiritual leaders or faith communities make right now? In this moment?

Allen Ewing-Merrill: Spiritual leaders have the experience of tending to grief. They're pretty well versed in navigating conflict, of bringing people together, even across lines of division, for shared purpose and practice. And often they are within, but kind of also on the edges of existing systems. It seems to me this is a moment when we need to recognize our interdependence, that we're caught in this inescapable network of mutuality as, as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King said, in a moment when we're called upon to turn toward one another rather than against each other and really commit to the common good, to collective flourishing. It seems like that is the role of spirituality, of faith or religion, however you conceive of it, to consider these really big and important questions. Who are we accountable to? What does it mean to be alive in this moment that matters so much? What does it mean to live a good life, to love our neighbors, to welcome the stranger? That's a question. I hope that all spiritual communities are asking because soon there will be moments, if we haven't already, when we'll be called upon to welcome climate refugees from other countries and even from within our own country. When you think about it that way, it's not abstract, it's actually very tangible.

Debra Coyman: I just add that spiritual leaders can also bear witness to what is true and what is important. Like the biblical prophets did. Allen and The BTS Center staff have been talking about how to use the prophetic voice. I think if we're going to change or trade out the systems that have gotten us into this mess and challenge the status quo, we are going to need spiritual leaders of all kinds to speak truths that challenge powerful interests.

Jessica David: Great. Yeah. That makes me think too of what Allen was, was saying about going back to that ancient wisdom and looking at our history and really calling back to times where we have faced existential threats and how humans have responded in those moments. And there feels to me like what The BTS Center is suggesting is there's a lot to learn from those from the past.

Allen Ewing-Merrill: There's a lot to learn, and I think there's a lot to reckon with too. It's a moment when we really have to think about our human responsibility and also our complicity in the systems that have gotten us to this place. Climate change is a direct result of our ways of being over the last several hundred years. And it's that recent, really. In that quote that I shared earlier, environmentalist Gus Speth talks about selfishness, greed, and apathy. And we could probably go a layer deeper and think about what's underneath selfishness, greed, and apathy. And also we could go a layer beyond and think about how selfishness, greed, and apathy manifest in this pernicious cycle of domination, extraction, and consumption. That is the cycle that we're in in our relationship with the Earth. Domination, extraction, and consumption. As a Christian, I want to say, especially as this faith Christianity has been practiced in white Western contexts, you know, colonizing worldviews that, that we actually have some responsibility for this way of being. So it's a moment when it's important for us to pay attention to our responsibility and also to acknowledge our complicity.

Jessica David: Indeed, the things that you're bringing up, Allen, which I completely agree with, those are not easy things for humans to deal with. We are not great in this country at this moment at recognizing our own complicity and dealing with the feelings that it brings up, the guilt, the shame, the complicated histories we may have individually and within our communities. Can you describe how the work of The BTS Center responds to that?

Allen Ewing-Merrill: Well, I think it's a reminder that this is not something we can do on our own. Like, if I just get in my head and I think about all of this, you know, I'm filled with these heavy emotions, and I'm wallowing in grief and guilt, that's pretty paralyzing, it seems to me. This is the work of community. Whether that's a faith community or another spiritual community or your neighborhood. Who are the people with whom you can process, and who are the people with whom you can imagine better ways of living, better ways of being, that actually respond to the moment and actually offer a sense of hope and reassurance and comfort?

Jessica David: That was lovely. Thank you. Could you provide a little more detail, Allen, about the principles or the ideas that guide the work of The BTS Center?

Allen Ewing-Merrill: There are five themes that show up again and again through The BTS Center programs. They're kind of through lines, and they kind of weave their way through most everything we do. And I'm going to just share those five very briefly. The first is kinship. And this is kind of pushing back on the idea that human beings are the pinnacle of creation, you know, and instead kind of acknowledging our interdependence, that we're not separate from nature, we're actually part of nature. So that's kinship. The second is around imagination. Our mission actually begins with this phrase to catalyze spiritual imagination. We're living in a time of imaginative decline, and there are reasons for that. What kind of world do we want to live in, and how do we get there? Through our programs, we're really trying to foster collective imagination. The third is around ecological grief. This is attending to climate emotions, to use the fancy term, the psychosocial spiritual dimensions of the climate crisis. Ecological grief, climate anxiety, the emotions that come up when we reckon with this moment we're in. The fourth is a concept that we have received from a wonderful author and scholar, Debra Rienstra. And that is the concept of refugia. This is a term that

actually comes from biology, scientific concept, around pockets of shelter that emerge where life is preserved in times of devastation and from which life regenerates. So we think about how spiritual communities can be refugia in a time of great challenge. And then the last of those five areas of focus is the common good. We live in this world that is preoccupied with the individual. Think about individual liberty or individual prosperity, individual success, even individual salvation. And we want to make sure that our programs are always pointing toward and fostering collective flourishing. So these are five themes that are central to the work of spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world.

Debra Coyman: Across those five themes that Allen has referred to, we are also trying to widen the conversation and bring in perspectives that go beyond strictly white, middle class Western worldviews. One example is that the staff has really worked to establish relationships with the Wabanaki spiritual leaders who share indigenous traditions of kinship, their experiences of ecological grief, and their economic system for living in community, which is very different from what we have come to know. And so we invite Indigenous perspectives and we engage with black leaders and other people of color as we facilitate conversation about how to live in right relationship with the world. And as a board member, this feels important to me because it demonstrates our organizational value of integrity as well as deepening the conversation.

Jessica David: I love these themes and I love how they really push back against some of the things we were talking about earlier in terms of the notion of growth at all costs and individualism and profit above everything else.

Debra, I know you've participated in BTS programs. Can you tell me about a particularly meaningful experience you've had?

Debra Coyman: I'm an avid attender of programs. It's one of the benefits of being on the board is you get to go to whichever ones you really want to. And all of the programs I've participated in have been meaningful in subject matter, in design, creative in delivery. I definitely recommend to listeners to try out a few different kinds of programs and see which ones you like the best. But the one I want to highlight today happens to be one I attended just last night, which is titled Lament with Earth. It's a program of worship experiences, online worship experiences so over zoom that have been offered over the last three years. I think they've been aligned with the seasons. So one for spring, one for summer, one for fall, et cetera. And also with Earth's elements, Water, Fire, Dirt, Air. We have been in partnership with a very talented group of artists and musicians who call themselves The Many, also other eco justice organizations in presenting these programs. And what the programs do really is give you space in community, but it's your own space for lamentation. So when you're carrying that eco grief that Allen was referring to, you have some time to contemplate. With original music and with stunning visual accompaniment, you have an opportunity to express and acknowledge your grief and pain. So I've mentioned that I have a lot of pain about climate change, but I have difficulty expressing those feelings because I've been brought up and my professional career has been a place where my intellect was always first, and so I'm used to stuffing down the emotion, and then sometimes it never comes back up. This program opens me in a way that I can find the grief and get it out. And I am invariably in tears by the time I'm done with, you know, by the time

the hour is up. But I kind of see them as necessary tears and as a release of the grief. The program always ends with a reminder of the hope that we carry of new life amid suffering. The strength that we can find in community both when we are in pain, but also as we try to work towards new life, reminds me that I am not alone in the feelings that I'm having.

Jessica David: My last question, my favorite question. I saved it for last. What do you each want to be different as a result of The BTS Center's work?

Debra Coyman: Well, as a lay leader in a local church, I look forward to my church integrating climate concerns into our community in meaningful ways. And I think The BTS Center will help make that reality by preparing pastors and lay leaders with theology, with practical programming and tools, and with peer support in community. How can we help spiritual leaders prepare to support their communities as conditions worsen? And how can we remain connected and move towards new models of community? How can spiritual communities show the way forward?

Allen Ewing-Merrill: That's great, Debra. Yeah. And I really want to widen the conversation so that increasingly faith leaders and faith communities are understanding that climate is not some other mission project, but it is the very context in which all ministry and all mission are happening. And one of the things that I hope will be different is that individuals and communities will have greater clarity about their vocation. What is my work to do? What is our work to do? What is the place to which God is calling me or us? And growing confidence about the unique role that spiritual leaders and faith communities can play in this. I just really believe that God is inviting us to wake up, like, to see clearly, to expand our worldview, take stock of our resources, including our spiritual resources. Ultimately, if I want to dream really big, my hope is that we can be a part of a kind of a new reformation. I really believe that in this moment God is doing something new. There's this invitation to tap into it. If we do this has the potential to transform spiritual communities and help our world live into new ways of being.

Jessica David: That's beautiful. I love both of those responses and visions. I also want to add in the truth telling because I think in order to get there, it feels to me that something very critical The BTS Center does is bear witness to what is happening, what it brings up for people and makes people experience.

Thank you so much, Debra and Allen, for such a rich and engaging conversation. I'm so grateful to have you two as my first guests on this Behind the Scenes with The BTS Center version of the podcast.

Debra Coyman: Thanks, Jessica, it's been fun for me. It was a great opportunity to engage with Allen in trying to understand what we should say in response to your deep questions. So thank you for that opportunity.

Allen Ewing-Merrill: And now I know that you were a game show winner.

Debra Coyman: I've outed my own self there. Yeah, money's long gone, confetti thrower listeners.

Jessica David: Now it's your turn. What is the most important thing you think spiritual leaders can bring to our climate-changed world? I hope you'll share with us by emailing podcast@thebtscenter.org or leave us a voicemail at 207-200-6986. I'll share that information again in just a moment. Thank you for listening to the Climate Changed Podcast Behind the Scenes Edition with me, Jessica David. Coming up in our next episode, we're going to talk about Hope: It's Complicated. I would love to hear from you. Please feel free to contact me about this episode or any questions or feedback you want to share. You can call, text or email. Leave a voice message at 207-200-6986. That's 207-200-6986, plus one if you are calling from outside the U.S. You can also text that number, 207-200-6986. If you prefer, you can email me. The email is podcast@thebtscenter.org, that's podcast@thebtscenter.org Visit climatechangedpodcast.org for show notes, a transcript, and more. That website again is climatechangedpodcast.org Many thanks to my guests Allen Ewing-Merrill and Debra Coyman. Also thanks to producer Peterson Toscano for producing this episode and Nicole Diroff for your assistance and support. Climate Changed Podcast is a project of The BTS Center in beautiful Portland, Maine. Learn about the many resources we offer along with our in person and online programs. Visit our website at thebtscenter.org that's thebtscenter.org. Goodbye for now. I am off to do my laundry.