TRANSCRIPT

Sonja van Rossen & Lexy Bourne, *Hosts*

Episode 14: “Interview with Julie Kleinig on Reconciliation Ministry”

Julie is married to Stuart Kleinig, an interim pastor focusing on biblical reconciliation for the Lutheran Church of Australia. Their ministry involves helping churches work through conflict and achieve biblical reconciliation. They currently live in Chinchilla, Queensland, and have three adult daughters who no longer live at home.

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Sonja: In today's episode, we're chatting with Julie Kleinig, who is the wife of the LCA's Interim Ministry pastor, focusing on reconciliation. They are currently serving in

Chinchilla, Queensland, and Julie faithfully supports her husband in this ministry. Welcome to our podcast, Julie.

Julie: Hi, thanks for having me.

Sonja: And we're joined by our wonderful Lexy, of course. Hi, Lexy.

Lexy: Hello, thank you! So, Julie, where do you live and what do you do?

Julie: Well, I live in Chinchilla in Queensland, and we're about 4 hours northwest of Brisbane, out in part of the Darling Downs. I don't currently work out of the home, I'm just at home supporting my husband in his role as a pastor here.

Lexy: And that job in itself is a very important full time job; being a pastor's wife.

Julie: Yes, it is.

Lexy: And how long have you been married?

Julie: We'll be married 36 years in November. I can hardly believe that, but, yes, time goes by!

Lexy: How did you meet Stuart?

Julie: So I didn't grow up in the Lutheran church, I grew up Anglican. In about Year 10 in high school, I met this girl by the name of Kathy, and she belonged to the Lutheran church, which I hadn't heard of. I started going to her youth group, which was in Adelaide, and their youth group was called U.G.L.Y, because it was the Underdale Glandore Lutheran Youth. So I used to go to her Bible studies and things like that and meet other youth. One of our members came from a farm off a little place called Yumali, which is sort of south of Tailem Bend, and they did a fundraiser, which was picking Mallee stumps out of the ground and then having them trucked to Adelaide, which would raise funds for their youth group. And someone else in our youth group knew Stuart and invited him along. And so on a whim, he just went and we met each other there. He often tells people that he pulled this stump out of the ground. You never know what you're going to find out in a paddock! So that's how we met. I think we dated for a year and got engaged and then we sort of came up with this bit of a dilemma - I was Anglican, he was Lutheran, what would we do? I said to him, “Well, I haven't really seen a nice Lutheran church.” I was attending an Anglican church, which was 100 years old with a marble altar and was a high church. I said to him, “Well, I'll do you a deal. If we get married in the Anglican church, I'll turn Lutheran.” And he said, Done. So little did we know that years down the track, god would call him to be a pastor.

Lexy: So how many children do you have?

Julie: We have three girls. Tasha's 30, Dana's nearly 29, Talia is 26. Their birthdays are all at the end of the year. We also have two beautiful little grandsons and another one on the way in February. We are very excited about that!

Lexy: So Stuart is a reconciliation pastor?
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Julie: He's the LCA interim pastor focusing on reconciliation. He took on that role in 2020, just at the start of COVID Yeah.

Lexy: So the year that we started coming to the Lutheran Church, that was your first year?

Julie: So we moved to Tasmania at the end of July. That was the start of this new role for him.

Lexy: For some reason, I keep thinking that you've been in this reconciliation ministry for years and years and years. But no, it hasn't actually been that long.

Julie: No, I mean, Stuart's journey started back in about 2009 when some pastors and laypeople came over from America and were teaching reconciliation. So he sort of had that under his belt for a little while and then I came on board in about 2012. But the actual call to become the LCA's interim pastor only came at the end of 2019, I think it was. And by the time we were meant to move earlier, but then COVID changed that all.

Lexy: So I suppose now's a good time to actually ask, what exactly is this reconciliation ministry that you are a part of? What does it actually look like?

Julie: So with Stuart's role, he's actually assigned by the College of Bishops. We've not tried saying no; we just go where the bishops feel that we are needed, where there's been conflict in congregations.
He does an agreement with the parish council or the church council that he would be here for a time anywhere between 18 months to two years. And that's part of the role that the bishops set out - previous interim pastors have been short term, three to six months. And they found that they probably needed someone in there a bit longer, so that's what they've sort of devised.
So Stuart sets up an agreement with a congregation to make sure that they're on board, to know that he's not just placed here, but that they are willing participants in this ministry together.

Lexy: So churches that have had conflict, it's Stuart's role to then go in and help sort out some of the issues and help the church stay together?

Julie: So once that he has that agreement with the congregation, knowing that we're not just forced upon a congregation, it is a called position that helps the congregation then have sort of ownership over that call. In a sense, we often get the question, especially when we arrive, is, "All right, you're here to fix it all?" Or things like that. But we're not, there is really one "fixer" and that's God. And part of that role is to walk with people and teach them the biblical way to respond to conflict and help them come to peace and healing through confession and forgiveness.

Sonja: Do you have a set course or a set Bible study program or something that you do, or is it kind of just case by case?

Julie: So part of the way that Stuart approaches this is that he takes people through a Bible study. It's actually from Ambassadors of Reconciliation in America called Conflict Resolution Versus Reconciliation and it talks about the differences. That usually takes pretty much all of the 18 months, depending on groups and how fast they work through the Bible study. Part of his role also that has been built in from the College of Bishops is that every three to four months he takes a two week break where he writes a report, and when we come back from that break, he gives that report to the congregations as to how things are going, what he's observed, things like that. When we first come into a parish, he will go and visit people and hear their stories about

what happened in the conflict. He knows that that's their interpretation. So he takes that on board and then tries to work with people where they're at. The Bible studies are a big part of it. His sermons are very much reconciliation based as well. He pronounces the gospel a lot of the time because as people in our everyday lives, we are so used to sharing the law with each other that the gospel often gets left.

Lexy: It seems to be part of our human nature to jump straight to the law. The gospel often gets left behind.

Julie: Yes, it certainly does.

Lexy: So what are some of the challenges involved in reconciliation ministry?

Julie: I guess moving all the time. Anyone who moves, I think, knows that probably it takes a good 18 months, maybe two years to settle into a place and really feel like you're a part of that place. And so for us, we have to try and settle a bit quicker if we can, knowing that we've got limited time.
It's also difficult for people. Some people will let their walls down and let you into their hearts a bit quicker than other people, but we still need to serve them as our brothers and sisters in Christ. So that's, I guess, one of the challenges. Moving states is always a challenge because every state has their different way of doing things.

Lexy: And you have to constantly say goodbye.

Julie: Yes, that is difficult. We sort of don't realise how quickly sometimes people worm their way into our hearts as well and that's something that we need to be open to. We can't just stand back. We sort of get caught up in people's lives too and they become a part of our life. I often say that wherever we move, our church family, especially if we move interstate away from our families, our church family becomes our family. So that is difficult, saying goodbye.

Lexy: What are some of the joys that come with this ministry?

Julie: Some of the joys are probably even the same as the challenges. With moving we get to see different parts of the country. I think God must have been listening, because we went to Tasmania for our honeymoon and I said I always wanted to go back. So God sent us there for two years, which was lovely. And, yes, so we do get to see different places. We get to meet, like I said, our brothers and sisters in Christ that we didn't know before. Some people when you first come, you can see that they've got conflict in their lives. And then sometimes working through the Bible study, or different books that Stuart will suggest that people read, you can see them have their “aha!” moments and where the penny will drop for them. You can see the weight lifted off their shoulders and how they can then deal with conflict in their own lives. It might not just be in the church, but even in their family lives - how they're looking at it differently. And that's a real joy to see that burden lifted off of people.

Sonja: Reconciliation ministry is really something that we should all be practicing in our lives all the time, isn't it?

Julie: Oh, absolutely! Stuart often says even if he went back to parish ministry where we stayed longer, he said reconciliation ministry would still be such a big part of his life, because that's what he sees is needed.

Lexy: I remember the Bible study that was part of your reconciliation ministry, it was brilliant! And even though we weren't a part of our church when all of the difficulties happened, I remember really benefiting from the Bible study and just seeing what the Bible says about reconciliation and being able to apply that to my own relationships and my family and friends. It was really beneficial.

Julie: Challenging at times, too. When we come into a place and people think that Stuart's going to fix things, part of that is allowing people to see what God says about reconciliation and about conflict in their own lives and letting them wrestle with what God has to say. Stuart could come in and listen to them and tell them what they've done wrong, but then that puts him in the firing line and it doesn't solve anything. But if you look at God's Word then we get to wrestle with God.

Lexy: Point it back to God, because He's big and He can handle it!

Julie: Oh, He certainly is!

Sonja: So what are some of the things that God says in His Word about reconciliation?

Julie: So I've pulled out a few verses. For me, the whole Bible is about reconciliation with God sending His Son to reconcile us to Him again.

But a few verses that we focus on in the Bible study...
When we're in conflict with someone, especially in the world's eyes, we sit back and we go, "Well, they caused the conflict. I'll wait for them to say sorry." But in Matthew 5:23-24, it talks about when you're offering your gift at the altar and you remember your brother has something against you, you are to leave the gift and you are to go and reconcile with your brother. And then Matthew 18:15 tells us that if your brother sins against you, and we can often tell when someone's not happy with us, you are to go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. So we're not let off the hook in either case. We're to go and sort out the conflict. Another one that we often use is Romans 12:18, which is, *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."* You might be able to resolve that conflict, but you might not be able to restore that relationship. But as far as it's possible and it depends on you, live at peace with people.

Sonja: It also reminds me of last week's reading. We did a Bible study on it and Lee loves to do the numbers. The debt that the servant owes the king, he worked out, was about $17 trillion. It would take him 20,000 years of work to pay it off. The amount that God has forgiven us is incomprehensible! He's forgiven us so much! We can forgive someone else something much, much smaller because of this. Because God has forgiven us so much. Who are we to go and tell them to pay up or hold grudges when God's forgiven us?

Julie: Yes, it is really difficult sometimes as we don't want to forgive and it is really hard to do that. We often tell people that forgiveness always costs the giver. It's not easy. There's a book that Stuart often refers people to as well, and it's by a lady by the name of Lysa Terkeurst, *Forgiving What You Can't Forget.* She has some good quotes in there.

Lexy: Forgiveness is very difficult. It can be very difficult, especially when you're doing it without the Holy Spirit. I know that there's also a lot of misconceptions about what forgiveness is, because a lot of people seem to

think that it is, “It doesn't matter what you did to me. I just have to pretend that it never happened.” But that's not what biblical forgiveness is.

Julie: No. And the thing that we learn in our Bible study is that if someone says, “I'm really sorry,” and you say, “Oh, that's okay,” then there was really no need for that person to say sorry for one. And the other thing is, in that moment, and I need to be careful, but only in that moment, what you're saying is *that person doesn't need Jesus because they don't need to be forgiven*. So we need to be careful, because if someone is sorry for a sin, then the best thing for them to hear is, “You're forgiven. Christ died for you and you're forgiven.”

Lexy: I remember coming into the Lutheran Church and confession and absolution rocked my world. Confessing as a church every Sunday and then receiving the absolution from the pastor is so comforting for sinners, especially sinners like me.

Even though Stuart is the reconciliation pastor, how are you involved in this ministry as his wife?

Julie: It was a really interesting journey for me when he took on the reconciliation ministry, especially because our first stint was in Tasmania. So I guess for me, I started out by accompanying him to meetings with people so that I could get to know the members quicker than only seeing them every fortnight. This created challenges for me, because up until that point, I had been a supportive pastor's wife in his ministry, now I was being more involved in it. It was challenging, because at times when people were recounting their stories, they were quite angry at people or angry at the church, angry at the way things had been handled and things like that. For me to see and be involved in that was challenging. Sometimes Stuart would come home and would then have to debrief me, because it's not something I had been involved in. So, yes, that was a bit of a challenge for me!
Even where we are now, I initially sat in with some conversations that he had with people and I try to attend most of the Bible studies, if I can, with him and just be a support for him. It's quite a lonely role moving around and it's hard to connect and make long term friends, I guess.

Lexy: And you're also constantly dealing with people's hurts. I imagine it would be a very tough job.

Julie: You see the worst of some people and the best of some people. But it's like I said before, when people work through the Bible studies and then they have those “aha!” moments and the joy that comes out of that is really special.
It's been a big learning curve for me, I think, going into this role.

Lexy: God has used your work and Stuart's work in the reconciliation ministry to even influence people who are not involved in the reconciliation ministry. Like my husband and I. We weren't part of the church when the difficulties came, we came in afterwards. But Stuart and you have played a huge part bringing us into the Lutheran church. And I sometimes think that if there was a different pastor there at the time who wasn't as well equipped to handle some of my wrestlings and issues, then maybe we wouldn't have become Lutheran, I don't know. The Lord brought you to Tasmania to help our church and through that the Lord brought us into that church. You and Stuart helped us.

Julie: Yes, and we often say to people, because we will get that comment. People outside of the congregations that know the situation will sometimes say to us, “Oh, I feel really embarrassed, because you're there helping them sort out conflict.” And that's not really nice at all. But we see it as an opportunity. We see conflict as an opportunity to proclaim the gospel through the forgiveness of sins.

Sonja: And you're giving people lifelong tools that they can use all the time.

Julie: And part of the Bible study is trying to equip the people. People do get concerned and think, “Well, what about when you leave and we have conflict?” And Stuart says, “Well, you have the tools now, you have the Bible study, you have God's Word. You have the tools that you can go back to to help with the conflict.”

Lexy: And the Holy Spirit stays there too.

Julie: He doesn't leave when you leave? No, absolutely not! We've left him wherever we go.

Sonja: Are there any kind of books or resources that you would be able to share with us for when we're in conflict with someone or if we're interested in reconciliation that we could look up or read?

Julie: Yes, certainly. This one I mentioned before from Lysa Terkeurst goes through her journey of a divorce and one of the things she wanted to be able to come to terms with was be able to look at her wedding photos without feeling that pain and anger, because that was a happy time in her life. She wanted to remember that. So it's her journey of how she works through forgiveness. So a Bible verse that I go to in times when I'm struggling, not just conflict, but when there's conflict in people around me is Psalm 27:1, *The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?*

Lexy: That's beautiful and encouraging. Well, thank you so much for coming on and talking with us today.

Julie: You're welcome. Thank you for having me.