

Peace Talks: Michelle Ami Reyes Interview Transcript

Vanessa: Hi, Michelle. It's so good to be with you today. Thanks for joining us.

Michelle: Thanks for having me.

Todd: We've been looking forward to this. Thank you.

Michelle: Oh, it's a pleasure to be here virtually with you both.

Vanessa: (laughs) Well, Michelle, we would love to start with the type of justice work that you are engaged in and specifically the parts of your own story that maybe brought you to this work in the first place.

Michelle: Sure. Yeah. You know, in my byline I call myself an activist — anyone that I know who believes in activism believes in the practical outworkings of justice on the streets of their community. Every person that I've talked to has experienced injustice in some deep and personal way that it just lit a fire under their bones. And the same is true for myself. From a very early age, I experienced racial bullying both verbally and physically. I just knew at age five, age six, that this was not the way the world should be.

This is not the way humans should treat one another. I couldn't verbally express that to you as a five year old, but I knew that that sort of bullying, that racial bullying because of a person's skin color, because of the way a person looks or because of the clothes they wear, the food they eat — that that was wrong. The older I got -- middle school, high school — I hadn't taken bystander training (laughs) or anything like that. But when I saw someone else being bullied, and I think because I had been bullied myself, I had a high radar for that, whether it was in the cafeteria or on the playground, or, well, I guess not the playground for high school, but when you're outside hanging out in the parking lot (laughs) and whatnot. I had a high radar for sensing and seeing other people being bullied. And sometimes I didn't know what to do, except for just to put my body in between the bully and the person being bullied and to say, "Hey, what you're doing is wrong. You have to stop." And as I got older, I started to think about how, in many ways, this is the model of Jesus. That he shielded us with his body on the cross and took on the evils and the brokenness in this world to save us.

And so that experience from a young age still drives me today to have a high radar for people on the margins, for people who are experiencing racial profiling, who have experienced bullying of different kinds and to be an advocate — to not only to speak up for those who have been silenced, but to help equip and empower those voices so that they can speak for themselves. Narrative justice, if you will, passing the mic to those on the margin so their voices can be heard — they themselves can elevate their own voices.

So that's something I'm very passionate about. It is definitely a part of our ministry. My husband and I are church planters in Austin, Texas. We lead a minority-led multicultural church that we're passionate about in terms of pursuing justice for our neighbors, for our community and for the people on the streets of East Austin.

Todd: So Michelle, maybe say a bit more about the specific work you're doing. We love to point our guests to people like you and what you're doing.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Michelle: Oh, you know, wearing a few hats these days. (laughs) I'm a mom first and foremost. I have a six year old and a three year old and we just kicked off homeschooling. Today actually we had our first full morning of class, which, you know, even though it's like kindergarten and first grade math, I feel like I'm intellectually (laughs) maxed out (laughs) for the day. But besides that, as I mentioned, my husband and I were church planters. I serve as scholar in residence at our church, which is just a fancy way of saying that my speaking and writing highlights our church, and I utilize my speaking and writing as resources for our church. It's a joy and an honor to serve in that position. Beyond that, I serve as the co-founder and Vice President for the Asian American Christian collaborative. We do a variety of different works and projects in terms of amplifying the Asian American Christian voice and providing resources to care for and equip Asian American Christians, particularly in this moment, in the midst of COVID-19 and anti-Asian racism related to the pandemic.

I'm also the co-executive director of PAX, which is another Christian organization that's seeking to promote the peace of Jesus in the 21st century. So, keeping busy. I just released a book, *Becoming All Things: How Small Changes Lead To Lasting Connections Across Cultures*. And a good friend of mine, Helen Lee, who works at InterVarsity Press and Missio Alliance, we co-authored a book called *The Race-Wise Family: Ten Postures to Becoming Households of Healing and Hope*. That comes out next May 17th and is all about equipping Christian families to have the conversations and the practical activities and the prayers with their children, about everything from the beauty of our cultural identities, to how to talk about racial tragedies in the news to what it looks like to pursue gospel-rooted justice. So I'm excited for that book to come out. It's very practical. So I have a couple different things going on right now.

Todd: Well, we're gonna ask you about *Becoming All Things* in a moment, but I'm gonna live with that phrase for a while. Gospel-oriented approaches to justice.

Vanessa: Yeah. I do love that.

Todd: That's really good.

Vanessa: I love that. And I love what you're talking about too, about having a gospel-wise family.

Todd: Yeah.

Vanessa: That sounds really rooted in the story that you were telling us earlier about your own upbringing, like having these practical tools for a family to have these conversations about what's going on cross-culturally, not only in the church, but maybe in school or in their neighborhood, in their communities. So it's clear that your faith really informs your justice work.

I'm curious about some of your own spiritual rhythms. At The Center, we're really focusing on how to become well-formed individuals so that we can engage in the deeper work of justice and really sustain it long term. And so what are some of your own spiritual rhythms that you practice to keep you connected with God, self and others?

Michelle: Amen. I love that. Because of new friends that I've made over the past year, particularly Anabaptists, I'm growing and learning in contemplative practices. And there's so much beauty in that. I would say for my life, but also throughout my marriage, with my husband, Aaron — we've been married over 11 years — and we've always had this motto for the two of us where we sometimes say jokingly, but oftentimes seriously, it's just an “audience of one.”

No matter what it is that we're doing, whether it's church planting or our own writing and speaking — whatever we're doing — even if it's posting something on social media — we challenge ourselves to always have the heart and the posture of having an audience of one. There is no other reason for why we do what we do, why we pursue the full gospel which includes justice, which includes proclaiming the gospel and bringing people to faith — but also caring for them physically and educating them, equipping, empowering. The reason why we do all of that is in service of our calling to God — to honor him, to glorify him with what he's given — whether it's the platforms or the skills that he's given us.

And so what that looks like practically in terms of being grounded in that audience of one is being rooted in scripture. Both Aaron and I have made it a habit early on in our marriage to get up early and to start our day in scripture. We do different things — whether it's just reading it and praying in response or doing something a little bit more involved like Lectio Divina or some sort of prayer of Examen or different sorts of engagements with scripture. But we always start our day in God's word and in prayer. And that has always rooted me.

I think about Psalm 119 where the Psalmist says, "Your promises have preserved my life." And I think about all the different things that we've gone through in our own marriage, in our church, in the world — from March 16th when six Asian women were murdered in Atlanta to the rising anti-Asian racism of this past year to even just some of my own experiences that I've had where I've been refused service at a restaurant. My children have been refused medical service here in Austin because of racial profiling. All the different things we've gone through — that verse in Psalm 119, “Your promises have

preserved my life," is so true for me, so true. I don't have any magic formula. I've created that discipline of staying rooted in scripture and truly trusting and believing in God's promises and making sure that whatever I do is to honor and glorify him because the minute that our pursuit of justice, or even our pursuit of Shalom, or our pursuit of fill-in-the-blank — the minute that Jesus is no longer the center and the core of that — it's all for naught. And so it's a simple practice, but that's what keeps us grounded.

Todd: Good. Well, let's talk about *Becoming All Things* for a moment. First of all, thank you for writing it for people like me, who are kind of new to this conversation in the last couple years. It's great to be able to glean something from your long experience. So one of the things that I've learned coming into this conversation, Michelle, is that it's tricky, especially if you're an old white guy starting to work with people of color, to not inadvertently tokenize them, or kind of make them into a project, especially a project that merely makes me feel better about myself. So can you give people, who haven't read your book yet, your vision for engaging cross-culturally that's rooted more in things like a genuine, open curiosity and seeking one's own spiritual growth as we enter this conversation?

Michelle: Yeah, absolutely. The foundation of my book — what I rooted all eight chapters in — is 1st Corinthians 9:19-23, where the Apostle Paul says, "To the Jew, I became like a Jew." And he talks about those not under the law, meaning Greeks, Gentiles, basically non-Jews — I became like a non-Jew to win them. And he says, "I became all things to all people for the sake of the gospel." I can't tell you how many times in my life I read that passage. But it was a few years back where I was rereading it, and it was like —if you've ever had that experience where you read a passage of scripture and you feel like you're reading it for the first time, like it's hitting you completely differently — that's how it felt in that moment. And I kept reading that part where Paul says, "To the Jew, I became like a Jew." And I thought, what in the world (laughs) is he talking about? Like, Paul himself is a Jew. How is a Jew becoming like a Jew?

And that's the catalyst for all of this research and looking more into who Paul was talking to here. And really at the root of that comment — and even to become like those under the law — Paul is making this really provocative claim, or statement if you will, that no two Jews are the same. And the same thing, no two Gentiles, no two Greeks are the same. And then you start to see more about Paul's own ethnic background. He's a Pharisee, he's educated, he's part of the educated elite. He was educated under Gamaliel — he's a very specific type of Jew. But then you also see there's the Sadducees, and there are so many theological differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees. And you see the Essenes — the people of the land — the Zealots — the political activists — and you start to realize, oh, wow. Then you see in the book of Acts, for example, there's the Jews in Jerusalem versus the Jews in the diaspora. All of a sudden, there's different cultures, there's different languages. When Paul is saying to the Jew, "I became like a Jew," he is saying that to the best of his ability, he's going to figure out how to connect with all of these different types of Jewish peoples with their different backgrounds and worldviews and lifestyles and ways of speaking for the sake of the gospel. And the same with the non-Jewish world.

And I thought, what a powerful statement. You could say the same thing for any other people group, for Indians, for example. You could line up 10 Indians — me and nine others — and we would be completely different. You know, one Indian from India, one Indian born in Trinidad and Tobago, one Indian born in Canada, one like myself born in South Carolina. And we would all be so different.

I like to say, "I'm like all Indians, I'm like some Indians, and I'm like no other Indian." I am a unique individual. And my cultural identity is wholly different from anyone else. And so one of the things that I encourage people in my book is to not see any two people the same way, whether it's yourself or anyone else. And I think some of the common pitfalls that we see is "I have one African American friend." So the way I relate to her is the way I should relate to all black people. Or I have one Asian friend and she's really good at math. Therefore, all Asians must be good at Math or fill-in-the-blank.

The thing is that we're not a monolith. We all have our different personalities, different favorite foods, different family values, different traditions. So as we seek to become all things for all people, for the sake of the gospel, our starting point has to be to change our own perspective on our fellow humans and to say, "Okay, I'm gonna take away any assumption, any stereotype, anything that I think might be true about this person," and come in, instead with open hands, open heart, ask open-ended questions. Like, tell me what's your story? What are your ethnic roots? What are your favorite foods? Who are the heroes in your community? What do you wish people knew about you? What does justice look like for your community? And just let that person talk for themselves, define themselves and just give them that honor of being a unique individual.

Todd: Yeah.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Todd: I don't remember if you quoted this in your book, Michelle, but I have for many years loved the way Eugene Peterson gets that passage in 1st Corinthians 9:22 where he says, "I entered their world and I tried to experience things from their point of view."

Michelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd: "But I didn't lose my bearings in Christ. I didn't take on their way of life." I've always loved the way Eugene paraphrased that. And especially, like you said to me, the curiosity that's implicit in that notion of, "I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view."

Michelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Vanessa: Yeah. I do love the aspect of curiosity as a biracial black woman.

Todd: Yeah.

Vanessa: Being raised almost exclusively by a white mom, one of the things I respect about your work, Michelle, is the distinction that you make between culture and ethnicity, which you've kind of alluded to a little bit. But I wonder if you would talk about why it's important to make that distinction.

Michelle: Yeah, absolutely. I think a lot of us, we're still formed by those books on culture that came out in the 1950s (laughs). We're formed by scholarship so it's important to know where we've come. But I think for so long, we have been taught that people are formed as groups and we have group identities. Therefore everyone from India is the same, everyone who's American is the same, right (laughs). Like I'm American (laughs) as opposed to I'm Dutch, I'm German, I'm African or Central American. We have these sort of big categories where all these people must live, think, act, look the same way.

But in our globalizing, multicultural boundaryless world, ethnicity, nationality and culture no longer mean the same thing. I have friends who are Persian and they're like, "We are not Iranian. We are Persian." And they're trying to make the distinction between who they are culturally versus what it says on their passport. That's an important distinction. And so when we're talking about culture, we're talking about the narratives that are born from our ethnic heritages if you will. We are, implicitly, storied people. We are people of stories.

I am a mix of both the stories that have been passed down to me by my family, my community, but also the new story that I am creating with my husband, with my family. We are a multi-cultural, Indian, Mexican, Caucasian family. My daughter... Well, I should start with my son. My son looks like me, brown skin, dark brown hair, dark brown eyes. My daughter has fair skin, blue eyes, blonde curly hair — beauties of a multiracial family. So my story is not just my mother's story.

My mother was brought, or her parents were brought as forced laborers to Uganda, Africa to build the railroad in Uganda, by the British empire. Her family fled under the dictatorship of Idi Amin and fled genocide and moved as refugees to England. That's part of me — that story of immigration, of crossing borders, fleeing genocide, that's part of my story. But I'm also my own person and I have my own story. I think it's really important for people to start with questions like, what is my story? What values have been passed down to me? Where is my family ultimately from?

If we are not native to this land, we came from somewhere else (laughs). We most likely came on a boat from somewhere else. Where did we come from? Why did we come to this country? What brought us here? And there's a lot of different reasons for why we were brought to this country, some beautiful, some horrific, so just because my nationality or my ethnicity says, I'm American, Indian, African, you know, whatnot, that might not necessarily reflect the whole aspect of my story. And we need to understand and give that nuance.

Todd: It sounds like what I'm hearing is there are various ways of being curious. I feel like what I'm hearing is a curiosity rooted in respect.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Michelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Vanessa: I would echo that. I think there's an element of not just being curious for curiosity's sake, but for being curious about an individual story and what you're talking about, Michelle, is this greater narrative that's also being played out. And the ways that we get to shift and change our story, and being curious about the ways that we want to move forward in that, even as you're talking about your book coming out in May.

Todd: Yeah. And I feel like a part of that respectful curiosity is to not make assumptions. Imagine somebody seeing your family in the grocery store, just think of all the assumptions they could make about your family. And that a respectful, curious listening means we don't prejudge or make assumptions about what we're seeing without hearing someone's story.

Vanessa: Right. And I think you talked a little bit about that too, just in, even if you were to line up 10 women who are from India — that's not a monolith.

Todd: Right.

Vanessa: Right. And then today we're seeing so many more multiethnic people such as yourself and your children, and my children are multiethnic as well as me. And so just taking all of the elements of story and culture and history, and distilling it, like sifting it through the lens of the gospel of Jesus and what it means to be a good neighbor.

Todd: Yeah.

Michelle: Amen. Amen. I love that. And I think part of it is how often we rub shoulders with people who are different from us, because the more that we are positioning ourselves in other multicultural spaces, the more we will learn that not everything is right and wrong, sometimes it's just right and left (laugh). It's not right or wrong, it's just different if you will.

And I'm grateful, for example, that my parents were very intentional about travel to different countries around the world growing up. And so part of my formation as a kid was opening my eyes to different peoples, different foods, different ways of life. I promise you, I'm not hating on vacations at the lake or in the mountains or at the beach — there's beauty in that too. But I think for families who only go to the beach for vacation, or only go skiing or to the lake, we're missing out on the opportunity to take time out of our regular rhythms, to rub shoulders with people who are vastly different from us, and to learn to see the world around us.

It's different levels of noise, the foods that have different smells, even how close somebody stands next to you to talk to you. I have a degree in German literature. And so I used to live in Germany, I worked with German colleagues, and they would stand like three inches from my face when talking, and that's very German. Every time I'd kind of cringe, 'cause I'd be like, "Too close, too close." Like my personal (laughs) space feels violated. But this is what's normal to my German colleagues. If I flinch backwards, that's going to show a lack of love to them. And so learning to tell ourselves "I am not the standard" and to actually challenge ourselves to ask ourselves, "How much cultural discomfort am I willing to bear? How, how uncomfortable can I be for the sake of the gospel?" I think this is where we need to be challenging ourselves so that we don't go down the road of not just judging people but even beginning to control people. And we've all seen the way in which when we feel threatened, we not only reject, but we control, and controlling is what actually can lead to lives lost. And so this is a very damaging, dangerous cycle to go down. We can stop that cycle by saying, "I am not the standard, and I am willing to forbear much cultural discomfort for the sake of the Gospel."

Vanessa: Disrupt the cycle, Todd.

Todd: Hear, hear. Amen. (laughs). So Michelle, the three words that shape the Center are formation, justice and peace. Our working hypothesis is that justice is not consistent and fruitfully pursued because we're not formed well to do that. We honestly don't have the heart or desire to pursue justice, and of course only justice can produce lasting peace.

So I'd like you to help us with something, because we're hoping to really work with people who are new to this conversation at The Center. So one of the things that I think scares a lot of people these days is something like this, "I would love to pursue the peace that comes on the other side of justice. The problem is bringing up any issue of justice, whether it's race, or immigration, or migration, or economic issues, or incarceration, whatever, to bring up any of that seems like you're automatically being divisive." Can you help us figure that out? Like, how do we talk about this without being automatically divisive?

Michelle: I mean, man, how long do you have? (laughs) I'll say this, we haven't been spiritually formed in a robust, complex understanding of biblical justice to have any sort of category to approach real world issues today. I think we need to get back to scripture and to look at what scripture says about justice. And ultimately justice is rooted in the very character of God and the outworking of that character. I could share a lot of verses with you, but I'll share Job 29:14, that's one of my favorites, where it talks about how God says, "I put on righteousness as my clothing, justice was my robe and my turban."

And when we see that outworking in scripture, we see that God's justice is complex. A lot of theologians throughout the centuries have talked about this. Herman Bavinck argues that in the Bible God's justice is both retributive and reparative or restorative, if you will. I was raised as a very conservative Baptist, Northern Baptist. The only type of

justice I was taught about was that crime and punishment sort of justice, like do not sin because God is judge (laughs) and judgment day is coming.

But God doesn't just punish evil doers. He has an eye for the needy and gives the poor a position of honor and wellbeing. And we see this in so many ways, whether it's the forgiving of debts, the gleaning of fields, tithes for the poor. So much of the Torah in the Old Testament is geared toward creating an alternative society for the people of God to be more just and to enable flourishing of people in contrast to the civilizations of the ancient near east.

In short, if we are to take the perspective of justice being an outworking of God's character, what we see throughout scripture is that God's heart is for equality, universal equality where every person is treated with respect. There's radical generosity that we are actually willing and joyfully to disadvantage ourselves for the sake of our neighbors and our community. I think this is where the gleaning of the fields comes in, where we don't just maximize our own profit and riches, but we leave parts of our own wealth and resources in the fields for people to glean.

I think that example of people gleaning in the fields indicates a sort of ownership, a communal ownership, like if God is ultimately God over our wealth and he says that we need to share what we have with others, there is radical generosity that needs to take place. Justice also looks like corporate responsibility — that we care for not only our own sins, but the sins of our neighbor. We see this in Daniel 9, 2nd Samuel 21, Deuteronomy 23, 1st Samuel 15, you see Daniel and others apologizing, confessing the sins to God for their ancestors.

What would that look like if the church today actually confessed our country's sinful patterns? What would that look like if we, as North American Christians, said we are going to care about the oppressive systems that our country has created, commercial practices that have existed for centuries, that trample on the powerless, as a response to God's own character? And then finally advocacy. We see God having a special concern for the poor and the marginalized. Jeremiah 22:3 says we have to give extra care and honor to those who have been abused.

And so I think on the one hand, if this is what God does, (laughs) who is to argue against that? I think the more that pastors, seminaries, Christian leaders can be formed to this themselves and teach this from the pulpit, in Bible studies and books, the more that we can have a robust understanding of biblical justice, so that we have a better framework for approaching everything from refugees to immigrants to conversations like Black Lives Matter and critical race theory.

Todd: (To Vanessa) So I know you want to ask Michelle a final question here before we go.

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd: But how would you answer that question? When you find yourself engaging with people who say, you know, "Gosh, Vanessa, I'd love to talk about issues of race, but I'm just afraid of being divisive." What would you say to them?

Vanessa: This is something — and Michelle, you can speak to this as well — I come back to: You're gonna make mistakes and people of color, we kind of expect it.

Todd: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Vanessa: And so for us there's the welcoming posture, and for those entering the conversations, there's a posture of risk.

Todd: Yeah.

Vanessa: It's just sort of embedded in that. And I think as you're coming to the conversations with a rootedness, with a groundedness, with a well-formed approach, right, there is more room and space to flub up and make that mistake together, and also not put the onus on people of color to pick up and teach, right?

Todd: Yes, yeah. Yeah. I guess maybe the way to say it is just using one issue, like racism.

Michelle: Sure.

Todd: It's longstanding, it's broad, it's deep, it's complex. If we're gonna be honest, it's highly nuanced.

Vanessa: Yes.

Todd: And so what I hear you saying is that people like me should not be afraid that in that context I just described — you might not get everything at first.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Todd: And that it's okay to wander in that space with that honestly respectful curiosity.

Vanessa: Yes. And I think, how else are we gonna get anywhere, right? How else are we gonna move the needle? How else are we going to really begin to embody what heaven will look like and become comfortable with it before we get there? (laughs).

Todd: Yeah, hear, hear.

Michelle: Amen. Amen. I mean I don't think we can achieve the true peace of Jesus without conflict (laughs) in the sense that we do need to disrupt the status quo. We need to be that voice in the wilderness (laughs) calling for repentance. But I think that what we as Christians can do is have a balance of both our prophetic and our pastoral voice. We

need to prophetically call out sins and call out the evils of the world because like you said, Vanessa, how else are things going to change? But we do it at the same time with a pastoral invitation that says, here's the way to Jesus.

I think this is oftentimes where Christians get it wrong. We fall into those cycles of secular agendas of cancel culture and just shaming people. That gets nobody anywhere. And there's no biblical precedent for just shaming people. But I have had very positive, successful conversations with people when I said, "Hey, you know what? That phrase you just said was hurtful to me. And I'd appreciate it if next time could you say this instead? And I actually gave them the alternative, "Could you try this instead?"

And I've never had somebody be like, "How dare you?" (laughs). But if I lead with my heart, with how it made me feel, and also say, "Could you try this instead?" And I do it in a way that is speaking the love and peace of Jesus throughout it, I think that is the way that we truly equip and empower people to take positive yet radical steps forward toward racial reconciliation.

Vanessa: Absolutely.

Michelle: Great.

Vanessa: Absolutely. Well, Michelle, we like to close with a question that kind of centers around hope as we think toward what it means to be well formed, to move into the sector of justice and to experience some peace here on this side of heaven. When you think about hope, what brings you hope today? Anything from our conversation, to your kids, we're thinking really broadly and expansively here when we think about hope — a person, a song, a book, what moves you toward hope and where do you feel God inviting you toward hope?

Michelle: Oh, man, I don't know if I'm gonna answer this right, Vanessa, but the first thing that comes to me is just that I find hope in knowing that Jesus is coming back (laughs). And I think about all of the evils in this world. I think about how, about a month ago now, we buried a 19-year-old boy in our community. There was a high school party where a fight broke out and a 20-year-old African American boy shot another African American boy, a football player from a local high school. I mean, it was just devastating, and we had to bury him.

I'm thinking about how we, as a church, my husband and I, how we are doing all that we can for the streets of East Austin. You know what I mean? We are trying to care for people, but we're also trying to change the systems. We're trying to change the policies. And yet there are still single immigrant mothers with eight kids who don't have enough food for everybody. And people don't feel protected. There's gun violence, there's cartels, kids who have parents that are living on the streets.

And some days there's really wonderful, positive stories of how we're seeing God at work and people are coming to faith and, and people are getting out of really dark

situations, and then there are other days, like when we buried that boy, that I was like, "Jesus, come today. (laughs) You know, like I'm done." (laughs) And just that sucker punch of knowing that even though Jesus is restoring all things to himself that it's the yes and the not yet, if you will. And so that hope that Jesus is coming back and he will fully restore all things and that evil will finally be done, no tear will be shed. Especially on the hardest days, that's what gives me hope.

Todd: Yeah. Hear, hear.

Vanessa: Yeah, hear, hear.

Todd: Thank you, Michelle.

Michelle: Oh, thank you guys. (laughs) I feel like I could talk to you for another two hours. (laughs) Grateful for the good work you guys are doing.

Todd: Thank you so much.

Vanessa: Thank you.