

# ***Open to Wonder: Reggie Smith | Beyond Sunday,***

## **Episode 2 Transcript**

Karen: Today we are joined by Reggie Smith and we are so grateful that he is sitting down with Chris and I. Reggie is the Director for Diversity for the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Prior to working for the denomination he co-pastored at Northside Community CRC in Paterson, New Jersey. And for more than 20 years was the pastor of Roosevelt Park CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Reggie has served as an adjunct seminary instructor at Calvin Seminary and a columnist for The Banner and is an avid fan of the Chicago Cubs baseball team. And I'm told that that fan love, Reggie, extends to the Chicago Blackhawks and the Bears, as well. Should I assume that you also love the Chicago Bulls, is that all part of the package?

Reggie: That is all part of the package.

Karen: Okay. You are welcome here anyway. [laughing]

Chris: Reg, we know that you're not just a sports fan but you also like to play the game. I've heard whispers that you have quite a streak going on of playing every week. What's that like for you?

Reggie: Oh man, it's beautiful. The only thing that messed it up was Covid. Covid messed up my win streak. I was going pretty much five days a week, six in the morning, and I've been playing for the last 22 years.

Chris: Oh my goodness.

Reggie: Every five or six, sometimes six days a week.

Karen: Wow.

Reggie: And that has kept me, pastorally, sane. It's kept me from homicide, and suicide.

Chris: So tell us a little bit about how basketball came to be that place for you, and maybe even your love for Chicago sports, all things Chicago and in that process. But—kind of—where did this all come from, how did that get nurtured along the way?

Reggie: Well basketball actually started way, way back when I was a little tyke and and actually just enjoying basketball because my school is across the street from where I live, and there was a basketball court. So, it was just kind of natural that whenever somebody would show up with a basketball. I was there.

And my mom to watch me from the top of the second story porch and, you know, having five boys—this is a good way to get the testosterone out of the house. And in a way to actually even save some stuff that didn't get cracked in the living room, and in the dining room. And so, that court became kind of a way of helping my mom to get those five boys out of the apartment.

And I just kind of kept that up and that was one of the reasons I ended up at a Christian Reformed Church is because they had a multipurpose gym in the mid 1970s that I didn't know about. And so I followed my brother, who really didn't want me to follow him. But I followed him anyway. And then found that this church that had this multi purpose gym and was like "woooo you can do this in the winter! Oh man, that was it for me. And so that was really my introduction to the Christian Reformed Church, as a fifth grader.

Chris: Wow, wow.

Karen: So Reggie, basketball led you to church. I'm wondering what helped. Was there a person or something at that particular church or in your life that helped form your faith?

Reggie: Oh yeah, that was from way way back even before that because you know my parents came up from Mississippi. As part of the Great Migration in the early 1950s, and they were both African American Baptist members. So I grew up in the African American Baptist Church and that was really kind of the community that really formed me in terms of my faith, so you know I was—I sang in the choir. I was an usher and being the usher in the church during that time, meant that I had to wear a tuxedo.

Karen: Whoa.

Reggie: Actual tuxedo, during the service. So, I had tuxedos that were yellow and brown. I had green. I had light blue. I have black and white. And so it was—I mean I left for church every Sunday. But knowing that I had to stay pretty much from eight o'clock in the morning till o'clock at night. That was the entire day. And so I grew up, you know, used to be in a church all day. You know, that was just normal for us and so a brother was in that church that I learned about, you know, the civil rights movement and the power of the Black Church, and how the church forms for politics and policy and freedom. And so, you know, the Black Church for me at a very very early age, about leadership, about power, race, about the power of the Holy Spirit. What it means to live in the intergenerational kind of context.

So before I ended up at that church at Lawndale, I was already formed by the Black Church and extremely grateful for that formation.

Chris: You named in a couple ways here you've named intergenerational as being pretty important. Who were some of the people that really shaped you, some of the older people who shaped you when you were a kid and shaped your faith?

Reggie: Oh man. Her name is Ms McReynolds. She was the head of the junior officers and she was always a stickler for detail, which I hated. And she would say “you want to make sure you have your white gloves, you have to wear gloves, as an usher, and you have to make sure you have your bow tie on and make sure that you are proper and prim, so that when you are introducing people into church and usher them to the pew, you have to be at your very best.” So really kind of drilled into me. You want to give God your best and giving God your best, that presentation, also plays a key part in that.

And so, Ms McReynolds, I can still see her. She's still alive—I can't believe it—and at my old church that I grew up in. She's gotta be like 98, 99. And she was just one who really cared about doing excellence for the Lord. And probably another person that was really really key, was an aunt, and this—I know everybody's got that aunt that they don't like.

Karen: You met my aunt!

Reggie: And she was the aunt that my parents, they lived in her apartment, before they got their own apartment, when they came up from Mississippi.

And her name was—we called her An'y and she was the only person I knew that was born in the 19th century. She's born in 1894 and because she moved across the street from us, us older kids,

four of us had to spend the night with her because it was part of our duty. And we would complain to our parents and please don't let me go. She smells. She makes us quilt.

And I can remember going to her apartment and she was quilting and I had to hold these quilt patches, these things called fat quarters, and she would sit there and what talk to me, and I can see in the window the kids playing basketball. This is right next door, and I'm thinking to myself, "this is the most boringest thing ever! I'm quilting with my great aunt. What could be worse!" And being like, you know, a small kid, but I can remember that she really taught me a lot about history. And how my family, on my father's side, people I had very little knowledge about—but she was this wealth of, kind of, institutional memory of people that I know, thought were long gone, but she made them come alive again. And just an appreciation for how she put that into me, telling me those stories and how important storytelling is from older people, because it gives us a sense of legacy, and that everything didn't start with me, and that I'm part of a long line of really strong and resilient African Americans who came up from the south. And they brought the church, and their formation with them.

And my aunt, my An'y did that. And so I spent many many days that I would spend nights with her. And I had to listen to these old, you know, I don't know if you remember these old Victrola radios? They were wooden, and we would listen to WMAQ for the news, and that's all she listened to. News and church music, church music and news. That's all she listened to.

And so it really was kind of the first time that she really wet my appetite for history in journalism, which I ended up majoring in in college.

Karen: I love the way that you know you mentioned it being an intergenerational environment and the way you were included as a child like of course you would be an usher in a tuxedo and of course you would help your aunt's quilt. I mean, in many contexts we'd see that "well that's for older kids" or "you got to try out" or that's, you know, but that you were included, and he mentioned storytelling.

And you mentioned storytelling and how the impact that that has had on you and I'm just wondering, the practice of storytelling...Do you, you know, weave storytelling into your own life or into your ministry? How does that form faith, hearing stories, telling stories? Why is that important?

Reggie: Oh wow, I mean, as a kid growing up in my church that was mainly what the preacher did. Weave story, and read, not only personal story but also scripture in a way that just really brought it to life that you felt like you were walking in the Scriptures, as opposed to listening to the Scriptures.

And so it was a—there was really conflicted for me when I started to the seminary, that it was more of an abstract surgical approach to Scripture, as opposed to a moving story picture, person-driven kind of story telling that was happening.

And I would just be enthralled with preachers, you know, whether that was King or, or other really prominent African American preachers, that they were able to take you into the story. Make that story come alive. And always lead out with joy. I think I learned I was formed for joy.

And always the sense that there's celebration. Because if you have gone through tough times during that week. You have to come to church to be reminded again of your somebody-ness.

That the issues of life wasn't kind of the last word, but rather, Sunday—Friday, may be here but Sunday is coming.

And so there was always a sense of celebration, and coupled with the new musicality that music brings too. So we were being formed by both word and music and storytelling. I'm just grateful that I grew up in this kind of context.

And that I'm always going back to it. During times when I feel like I'm struggling or trying to make sense of everything that seems to be going on in the world is to be brought back to that little church on the Chicago west side that you find joy here. And you can take that joy outside, Monday through Saturday.

Chris: You know, talk, talking about that a bit.. It seems to me that you're, you're framing joy as a counterbalance to the experiences throughout the week so there's something of, they, they go together they interact with each other.

Reggie: Right.

Chris: What has that been like for you both, both in terms of the joy spaces but also the lament spaces to have them—have Sunday morning dialoguing with the rest of the week, and the rest of the week dialoguing back with Sunday, how is that played out in your life?

Reggie: Oh man, it's playing out all the time because, you know, I lived in the community, where everybody on my block was from someplace else. They're really from Mississippi, or Alabama, or Arkansas, or Tennessee. Most of the apartments were all pretty much intergenerational.

So, there was no kind of nuclear family, there was always somebody who got a grandmother, grandfather, a cousin, a play cousin, I mean, there—you were connected to all these people who shared this common journey.

And they were all churched. They were so I mean, in the sense of—I had more mothers than just my, my mom. I have more fathers than just my father. I couldn't do anything wrong on my block because neighbors would whup me and then bring me home and I get a second whupping which brought on more suffering.

And, but there was this sense that we took ownership of each other's children. There was not this sense of "that's my family and was separated and the two shall never meet." But, but there was always back with 'you know the Lord doesn't like that,' there was always some, you know, didactic wisdom, or, or correction and and most families I knew what was going on in their lives. And in all of the outside things that we were battling, from poverty to redlining to all the things that were happening in the sixties and seventies...

But even in the midst of that we never, I never pulled into despair. And I've seen, you know, friends, brothers, who, who got caught up in that cycle. And they never made it out. So the unholy trinity of jail, drugs, or death was always looming for me and a lot of young men in my neighborhood.

But it was those churched people who kept stepping in the breach, and it would be giving little reminders of 'you were meant for more.'

Karen: Reggie, have you—I mean, you're painting such a beautiful picture of what it means to live as an intergenerational family of God, throughout the week and on Sunday morning. And I'm wondering, you know that was your childhood, those formative years—are you—have you experienced that kind of intergenerational family of God in churches as an adult? Are you seeing it in places? And what can we learn from that in places where we're not doing that?

Reggie: Right. I see it a lot in ethnic and diaspora communities. And I see that in my years living on the southwest side of Grand Rapids. I see families who are living intergenerational. And that is an absolutely beautiful thing so when right now that neighborhood is kind of undergoing another transition, in which we're now getting West African families from Liberia and Rwanda and Congo.

So there's always been these kinds of families. When the diasporas come, they always come into my neighborhood, whether that was Dutch. Now, Hispanic and now West Africa. And so, those kinds of families really exude kind of a little bit of what I grew up with.

And I think that there's something that we can learn about that, because I think in the Western sense, we're so individualistic. And I think that individualism has some good points, but at the same time it has some really bad points that we don't need other people in our lives. I can do it all by myself, which is really a false choice, and where the rest of the world is communal. And so what can—what I've been really seeing is that these kinds of families are going to be leading us, in terms of here's what authentic faith looks like and authentic spiritual formation looks like. It's all of these people who are shaping us. And no one is having, you know, the majority part, but rather that everyone is getting a slice of somebody who is, you know, offering something of value. And I think that's where, I think truly that's where we get worth and value from. And you don't get that as an individual, you get that from a community.

Chris: I mean what you're really, in some sense, talking about, is our identity being formed in the places that we belong, and those experiences of community belonging. And in that belonging going, "Oh, this is who I am. with these people I'm of these people," and that type of identity formation I think you're, you're right, really plays into our spiritual formation as well our spiritual identity in Christ, the you know the Heidelberg catechism q and a one.

You know, we start off with that profession that I, my only comfort is I belong to Jesus Christ, and that sense of belonging, being the root of our, our identity, that's a pretty powerful base to work from.

It gets me thinking about something that I've heard you say, so I'm going to quote you. I hope I get the quote right. And I think it touches on belonging and the way belonging has played out in different ways for you in your life, and I love for you just to react to it you, you said to me once:

"Chris, I'm an African American pastor called by an old Dutch church to serve in a quickly changing Hispanic neighborhood. What do I do with that?"

And you named in that all these different identities that were being pushed together, your identity as a pastor, your identity as an African American man, your identity as pastoring in a largely, a majority Dutch white settler community, Your identity pastoring a neighborhood in many ways that was going through huge transitions. Yes, and really, you know, so all these identities: How do you navigate all that? What does that do?

Reggie: I think it made me, a couple of things, I think it made me curious. I think it may be curious enough to say. "There's a lot I don't know. And I need to find out."

Chris: Okay.

Reggie: And, you know, whether that was, you know, a Dominican family that moved next door to the parsonage who are the Diazes' and connecting with their three boys. Here's when basketball

becomes formational. Because I have a basketball hoop above my garage and kid named Anthony says, "Hey, are you the pastor of this church?" and I say "Yeah." " But you're black." "Yeah." "Can we play basketball?" I said "yeah, sure!"

And that became part of building relationship with his family. And all of all three. I've been to their weddings. I've been to their funerals. They never joined the church, never joined. But they are the ones who call me when they got issues about life. And what I'm finding out is that identity comes relationally.

It answers the question, because we're all asking that question. Who am I, and who do I want to be? We can't be what we can't see. You can't be what you can't see. So we can talk about Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit. But if it's not modeled in a human being's life to which we are in close proximity to, we don't see it.

And I think that here's where our rationalism, my rationalism gets in the way. Because one of the most powerful texts in the Bible is: Jesus moved into the neighborhood. He didn't commute. He didn't send a fax or email or text. He lived it. And I think, communities open up space for there to be formation. And everybody adds value to a life. And, unfortunately, in our Western understanding, we've kind of segmented that. We separated ourselves, we self segregate.

Chris: Yeah

Reggie: by lifestyle to say, I have nothing to give you know, and in some ways, saying, I'm selfish about what's comfortable for me.

Karen: You know, you mentioned segregating ourselves and I want to get back to you. Anthony's family—you described how your life, intersected with theirs with, you know, death and loss and all the things, that their daily life, and your the faith, they intersect with that and yet you said, but they didn't join the church.

And I wonder if some— I mean, I, it feels like my experiences often are, you know, you get the question, "but have they started going to church?" Right? Like "well yeah you said you evangelize, but have they joined us, what are the numbers there?" And so can you talk a bit about that, like, the difference between them joining the church or they've opted not to be perhaps they're not there yet or perhaps for whatever reason they said no, but their faith is being formed relationally? Can you talk a bit about the importance of that? or should we be okay with the fact that someone says, "no, I don't want to be part of the church"?

Reggie: Yeah, I think we need to be okay with that because, first of all, number one, keeping score is about us. And when you say questions, did you join the church? That's the evaluative question to say, "can we check that?" As opposed to saying, the Holy Spirit works, long, and wide and deeper, and is not interested in keeping score.

But more, the question is, will you play the limited role in what you've been given? Just as Paul said, sometimes some of us plant. Some of us cultivate. Well what does Paul say? God grows it.

We don't get control over that and I think too often, we want to control the process rather than trust the process that you know that before Anthony came to the Holy Spirit was already working. Do we actually believe that the Holy Spirit is previous to us, and not after us? And I think this for families, is to give themselves, give themselves a break, that everything is not up to you, to form your children. There will be other things in which formation will happen. And you will not get credit for it.

Are you okay with that?

I mean how many of us have had things which happened in our lives, curveballs thrown to us, unexpected happenings that we never saw coming. And yet, the Lord uses that, even this works for my salvation. I just think that we do too much evaluative work, rather than sitting in a posture of learning and paying attention, and noticing as what this podcast says, wondering, how do we not try to take control of everything he's doing?

Chris: So, let me lean into that a little bit. I mean in some sense there's a great way of saying, you know, let go, let God. We're going to trust that God's got it all under control. But when it comes down to it, Reggie, I mean, that ain't easy, and it's messy.

You know you and I have had conversations about racism in the church, racism in extended families, racism in broader communities like, it's messy.

We talked about the upheaval about the political scene in the States over the last couple of years and how people can't often have a sit down conversation because they don't agree politically and there's so much tension.

Reggie: Yes.

Chris: How do you persist in that, how does your faith actually find some way of growing when there's so much adversity and conflict and anger and at times, violence, mixed in all of this? And how do you persist? How does your faith grow?

Reggie: Yeah. I—for me, my faith has grown through those kinds of challenges and. And what I found is sometimes I have to let go and say “this is not the right time to have this conversation.” There are times when I said that “I need to have this conversation” and live in the conflict and tension of that.

And then there's other times in which I allow other people to kind of play that role. And I observe. I learn. I try to remain curious. That what I've just kind of freely stated that God is always up to something more than what I can see.

And there's a lot of folk I don't want to take responsibility for. Let me count the ways. And yet at the same time, God has placed some people in my sphere of influence. And he says, “that's enough for now.” And I can be okay with that. And know that, do I actually believe that God is all knowing, all powerful, all present?

And why do I now just embrace my limitations? I think the hardest thing for us human beings to really see as a gift is our limitations. I think then we will be open to miracle. We've kind of pushed miracle out on the margins. Because that seems: “we can't get credit for that.”

Karen: seeing our limitations as a gift. Yeah. Wow.

Chris: That's—I'm going to phrase it this way. That's almost anti-American. You know, it's like anti-everything cultural that happens around us, you know, we—I'm in the middle of writing performance emails for people and and working with people and one of the questions that comes up in performance eval circles is, what are your weaknesses that you need to strengthen in the coming year? What do you have to work on? Like we see those weaknesses as things that need to be overcome.

And you're talking about limitations and saying, actually, there's some good in that, there's good in not being perfect in everything there's good and having limitations.

Reggie: Yeah, there is good in that because then you need other people. Because we, I think what has been said, is American evangelicalism is, it's about keeping score. It's about gaining status. It's about being superior. 'Cause that breeds competition.

And one of the most powerful scriptures, I think, is Philippians 2 as to when Jesus empties himself, he becomes weak intentionally to say "this is the best thing that could ever happen to you." But the hardest thing to ask for is help. Because it reveals our limitations. And Lord knows, we don't want to be known for our limitations.

Karen. No. Reggie!

Reggie: But the opposite of that is mystery, that God shows up in a way you never expected. And what we are trying to do is to kill mystery

Karen: Say more about that.

Reggie: Well I mean there's all through the Bible that we paid—We pay very little attention to the miracles, because we like to think, "well that's not gonna happen. That doesn't seem logical. You can't put that on the calculator." But what it does is open us to believe that God is up to something more than what we can see, feel or even imagine or count. And if we are willing to embrace our limits, how might God show up differently? That we actually begin to pay attention to grace. It's undeserved. It's a gift. And if we are antithetical to gift, then I earned it.

Karen: As a first born perfectionist you have just changed my life, Reggie, this whole, this thinking of limitations as a gift and paying attention to mystery. It sounds like, you know, we're—one of the things that in Faith Formation Ministries we're exploring a lot in the last year and moving into the future is faith practices, and the daily sorts of practices beyond Sunday morning that form our faith.

One of those, I'm hearing, is embracing this idea of limitations are a gift, embracing mystery. What—are there r faith practices that you have found formative in your faith throughout your life or maybe things that have changed recently that you've experienced?

Reggie: Yeah. I think one that's just, just kept me—One that kept me pastoring for 20 years, is to wake up each morning to say these words: Lord, how are you going to show up today? Will you show up in the homeless guy from Utah, who keeps coming into the church? And I don't know why he keeps comin, but he keeps comin. Or are you gonna show up in a child who says something deeply profound? And it deepens your joy, just for that moment. Or will it be in the wisdom of an older person who tells you a story. And that story lingers. Dear Lord, how are you going to show up to me today? Because he will. If you just pay attention to the signs he will bring your way. And then I, at the end of the day, I count how many ways he showed up.

And the list is more than 10, but that takes a different posture to say "how do I pay attention?" Well, we don't know how to pay attention anymore, because our life is just fast, busy and full. So, what does it mean for a family to say to one another: how did you see God today?

And I've not been perfect in this by no stretch of the imagination. I do not do this well, but I just keep reminding myself: "how are you going to show it today, Lord?" Maybe it's Chris coming into my office and saying "man I'm glad you came in." Or it's an email that you get from a friend or



someone who just sent you encouragement that you really really needed. Or a friend who asked for advice. And then you just feel honored that you can give that advice. That's formation.

I didn't give you a program. Those are ordinary practices. Noticings, wonderings and postures, of how do I put on my face eyeglass and notice where God shows up?

Chris: Wow I'm just sitting here going on soaking in wisdom from you. But that's not unusual. You usually do drop a lot of wisdom. So, but I gotta say, I'm sitting here going. You know that—in some sense, the way you describe it is so mundane, it almost seems boring.

Reggie: It is!

Chris: And on the other hand, there's tons of richness there, and I think it goes back to something you were saying earlier that, you know, in the North American church we want to earn it, we want to prove that we're worthy of this, we want to do something heroic and monumental. And you're like, it's a simple prayer, it's "Lord, help me to see how you're going to show up today." There's such a rich simplicity in how you're framing that, that I'm finding myself encouraged and challenged to enter into that type of simplicity.

One of the things we've been kind of thinking about talking about is how do we describe what this whole podcast is about? Like, how do we actually talk about it, how do we depict it? So, we landed on this logo that has a church pew. Kind of a pew bench taken out of the church and it's sitting on grass. So outside. And we see it kind of as a conversational place, maybe think of it as a church pew in the park. Kind of merging those two spaces together. Some parks also have a speaker's corner or a place where somebody can stand up and talk. They do presentations from, they can kind of let the world know what they're thinking about.

Let's imagine for a moment. There's a few of us sitting in the park, the church pew bench out in the park. And you get invited to stand up and say whatever's on your heart. Kind of this is Reggie's hour. What's the one thing you get up there and you would want to say, "Alright folks, when it comes to life in God's kingdom, here's what I gotta say. This is the one thing. What would you say?"

Reggie: Why do we work so hard for what God is giving for free?

Chris: Unpack that a minute.

Reggie: That's not my own, it comes from Donald McCullough, who wrote a book on grace. And he used to be a seminary professor. I think out in California. Yeah, that's it, he was at San Francisco, and he wrote this book on grace. And it just kind of symbolizes a kind of a counter intuitive way of how we think about grace. But more important, how we behave about grace. We know that grace is free. Do we? We look at—it's easy for us to get met at a welfare Bob, who is getting something. It's quite another thing, if we're getting it, we rename it. That's not grace. It's not a handout. When the whole thing is a handout.

The whole salvific business business is while we were yet sinners, Christ died for you and me.

That's a handout. And we've drank the Kool Aid of there's no semi-pelagianism. I earned this. There used to be an old commercial done by Smith Barney investment and had the old actor John Houseman.

He says, "at Smith & Barney we do things the old fashioned way. We earn it."

Why do we work so hard for what God gives us for free? Because when you earn it. You hoard it.

Chris: Yeah.

Karen: Yeah.

Chris: There's a whole nother podcast episode in that last for now. Yes, man. Wow.

Reggie: We gotta stop hoarding grace.

Karen: Yeah, yeah. Reggie, thank you so much for taking this time to just to just wonder, and to share with us your experiences, your story. Yeah, there's so much here that's so rich. So thank you for doing that.

If folks who are listening would like to get ahold of Reggie, you can get in touch with him by email at [rsmith@crcna.org](mailto:rsmith@crcna.org), and to learn more about the work that Reggie and his team are doing, visit [crcna.org/diversity](http://crcna.org/diversity), and there is a wealth that just, it's just worth googling that and visiting the website alone because there's so many amazing things happening, and stories that are being told there. So thank you. Thank you for taking the time and just spending this time with us and being open to wonder.

Reggie: Thanks for having me. And this is a wonderful, wonderful outlet. I think that you guys are a great team and this is going to bless a lot of people.

Chris: It's our pleasure. Thanks Reg!