

Open to Wonder: Ruth Padilla DeBorst | Beyond Sunday, Episode 1 Transcript

Karen: Today, Chris and I are so thrilled to connect with our guest Ruth Padilla DeBorst. I'm going to just introduce everyone to her Ruth would describe herself as a Latina woman with a doctorate, she's also been described as a wife of one, and a mother of many a theologian, and missiologist educator and a storyteller. Ruth has been involved in leadership development and theological education for integral mission in her native Latin America for several decades, her PhD is in theology from Boston University, and she works with resonate Global Mission heading up leadership development initiatives, leading the community of interdisciplinary theological studies in Latin America, and facilitating the international fellowship for mission as transformation.

Ruth lives in intentional community at Casa Adobe in Costa Rica, welcome Ruth We are so glad you're here.

Ruth: Thank you. It's a privilege to be with you today.

Chris: Okay, Ruth so I heard that intro, and I start wondering, it says Mother of many. So, so, how, how many are there and said how you count.

Ruth: Yes, because I, I actually birthed three. But then I widowed and remarried. So, through marriage, I received another three. And, but my husband and I really have have really opened up our home and our and our parents to several other. At the time, children or young people. And so there are three more in El Salvador that call us mom and dad and another couple of Nicaragua, that adopted us as their parents.

Karen: So it's just better to say many. Yeah. That's amazing. And I think part of what I've heard you name before and and what we even heard in the intro is, you are you and your husband are living in intentional community. And that phrase catches us like, what do you mean by intentional community.

Ruth: So we, yes, some, some of our community members would say we're actually an accidental community because this was not a big master plan, we didn't set out with my husband sit down and say okay five years from now we're going to be so many people and years from now we're going to have done this this and the other it's really been more of an answer to God's call a step at a time. We moved to Costa Rica in . We had five of our six kids at that point because when was already in college. We knew we needed space but we knew we weren't going to need it for too long. So we got provided this property with space, green quite a bit of an portion of an old coffee plantation. We saw it as a place of opportunity. We didn't know exactly what that opportunity would look like, but we knew that this was a place where we could grow some dreams or start making them come true greens, that would be proud of our colleagues that God had in our lives.

So we began praying, we began building but we built in such a way, like an old Spanish courtyard so that rooms would be pretty independent, we imagined we would be receiving maybe some single moms with the children or something, we ended up with our first community member was actually a young man with his daughter who had gone through a very messy divorce. So just through time we've received a refugee family from El Salvador, political asylum family from Venezuela.

Other, so some people have come out of need some people have come out of vocation. And we

currently are several families, sharing life, and we also receive members from that cohort program of resonate young people volunteering time of service and learning for a year. So the intentionality I guess is in the coming together with morning prayer with clarified and our gifts, as a community, we're very much. the broader environment so caring for the river that's just down the road, guided me, creating an encouraging our neighbors to develop urban gardens, just seeking to be faithful to God, in, in those in those things, so that's where the intentionality comes into living together, sharing life.

Karen: Wow, wow, you know, this, this series that that Chris and I are working on we're kind of thinking of it as beyond Sunday this idea of what it means to live out our faith. You know beyond the one hour perhaps that we're in a worship service on Sunday morning and what you're describing, I mean is like a seven living out and doing it with your family as part of your family life and I know a little bit about your, your family, your family of origin how you were raised. I'm, I mean, how is this fostered in you I'm guessing one day someone just doesn't just wake up say hey I want to like you were exuding it out of your pores. How did that happen like how were you raised. Yeah. In this way, what was fostered in you.

Ruth: Yeah, yeah, you're right on I mean definitely that's not, it's not something that just kind of spread into our minds and we said let's do it it really is something that's nourished a vision and, and a posture in life that has was, in my case personally nourished from a very young age from my family, my parents, I grew up in Argentina.

My, my, particularly My mother was an incredibly generous, open person who and our home. We were my dad was a pastor for a while he's that he was a theologian and a leader in, in, in a whole new movement, recognizing that in the wholeness of mission and gospel and. And so, and my parents really lived it out, they didn't just speak about it and so our home was very open to people, a young woman whose mother was alcoholic and she just really couldn't continue living in her in her mother's home. A family of a young woman who had recovered from drugs and was having relapses. And so the entire family moved into our home.

And so this kind of just porous extended family mode was very much part of my upbringing. And, and I see it so much as just the well, slowly then when I was when I had my own home. It also became open to people that needed a company meant and inclusion and embrace. And so, and my husband had done the same. In his previous life before our marriage so it just came very naturally to us. But, but you're right about the, the Monday to Sunday piece. We see this, we see it as an experiment, we don't we don't build ourselves as, Oh, this is the model of life, but we do see us, seeking to live faithfully from Monday to Sunday not to just go to church, but to live as the church, day in and day out in our values in our, in our priorities and the way we manage money and the way we use our time.

Chris: Mm hmm. That's a, that's a really robust powerful vision, but I imagine for some people who are listening and even for myself, there's part of it that sounds intimidating, almost overwhelming. How do you, you know, big, a big phrase around the parts time in in West Michigan big phrase is self care. How do you do, how do you, how do you care for kind of your own well being. In the midst of always being on mission?

Ruth: Yeah, well, you could ask the same thing if you think about your nuclear family. You're, you're always in that family, you know, you don't step out of the family to take care of yourself, you build the, the care of self and the, just the proper rhythm, for, for your own self reflection for your physical well being, you build it into the system of your nuclear family.

So yes, of course, stretching that to more and more people, it creates new demands, but it also frees you up. So for example, in your home, who does the cooking. You have to eat every day. Right. Somebody cooks every day in your home. Well, I only cook once a week at most. Why, because everybody else takes their turn, so I'm on this time my cooking on next Saturday so I have my menu plan and I'm ready to go. And I can give. Even if I need to, I could give a couple hours to that cooking and I still would be spending a whole lot less time cooking. Then, most of you do in your, in your homes. Yeah. Why, because we share that burden.

And so, that's just an example, these days during Covid. We have school age kids in the community. I know how much families have struggled with Covid. To keep up their jobs and their kids schooling. Well, there's obviously some demand on the community, but it's shared.

So, so the kids get Covid, but it's not all the burden on the parents alone, because all the parents pitch in and so we have a tiny mini school running. During Covid. So, in some ways, yes, there are new demands. And, and there is a bit of attention and the need to keep a balance to withdraw. We do work hard, we have. Nobody has to share a room, except with your spouse.

So you can retreat to your room, we have areas of the house that are assigned more for the public and others that are more than, quiet kind of almost monastery feeling of this is the quiet space so we don't bring people from outside into that space it's just internal so that there are borders in that sense to make it sustainable. We're not massively crowded, we're on a beautiful property with lots of green and so you can sit outside or terrace

So yes, it is a it is a constant negotiating your personal space and the community space, but I think the pluses are larger than the minuses. Yeah.

Karen: So, so here's a so here's that hard to ask in church question so Chris and I, I'm in Canada Chris's in North America, and. And so I have a home that I I'm kind of an introvert, I like my backyard I bought it because I could, I can note my neighbors can't see me, and I can read my book like, I'm living the opposite of what you're living and. So what do I do with that, like, are there, is that okay or is, I mean it's clearly it's not okay. Is there, what are like is there, how do I, what other ways can we live in intentional like it. How do I kind of do what you were doing but do it in a way that fits. Know what I mean yeah

Ruth: yeah i think i i do and we do have a particularly, I would say, especially one or maybe two very introverted people in our community and part of our learning is living with that natural leaning and making sure she and he are have the space they need.

Of course, a living this is Latin America. We are a much more communal society culturally than North America is. I do think however that even, even if you weren't to go the radical way of, you know, breaking down a bunch of walls to pull several houses together and make them one or something like that, that, that, that there are certain kind of core values incorporated in this that are livable, even in other manifestations other expressions.

So, so what for example, if, instead of every family needing, I don't know, needing to buy their own individual lawn mower. Right. What if you got together with your neighbors on the same block and said let's share one because ecologically. And in terms of just our footprint in the world, it would it would make sense to do that. What if you purchased fruit and vegetables from a local farmer together collaboratively. Instead of each of you going to the supermarket.

What, so it's it's just, I think, you know the Holy Spirit is the inspirer of creativity. So I don't have a formula for you in Kitchener, I think, but I think the questions that they have raised the questions, ask the questions What, what would it look like to live more intentionally as a community that is seeking to live out the values of God's reign and God's justice and contribute to the well being of our neighborhood, our city. In that in a more in a less individualistic way,

Karen: you know, that is that is super helpful, because because that those are practical examples and baby steps maybe that eight, getting to know neighbors that right like the simple act of one lawn mower for all of us. Sounds like oh well it's cost effective and it's better for the world but I can see how the ripple effects of that become community. Thank you. That's super helpful.

Ruth: I'm trying to imagine your world.

Karen: haha, It's very quiet Ruth.

Chris: Ruth you did your, your PhD work at Boston University so you've been in high academic environment. You did you serve as a provost of a theological education center there in Costa Rica, you're involved in lots of conversations and movements around integral mission and trying to help people understand that. What's it like for you to, to kind of grow your faith.

As you grow in knowledge, and you speak knowledgeably in all these heavy academic settings. How does your faith grow in that process, what's happening in your own formation as you engage those?

Ruth: Yeah, so a vital piece is are the rhythms we have as a community, we, we share morning prayer every week day. And it's a time, often it's a half hour. It's not a huge amount of time but it's every, every week day it's the beginning of our day and it's a space where there's prayer there may be silence, there may be Taize songs. It depends on who is leading, but I find that that intentionality again of framing my day with a with a recognition of God's presence, God's calling, what God is inviting us into and where God is active in the world is a pretty important piece.

The other really is. I I don't prepare a talk. Thinking exclusively about others. And what God might have to say to you. I also have to have to take it in and say what is God calling me into in relation to this thing, so that the word is actually shaping my values and questioning my priorities, and not just like somebody up there that has it all put together. So there's that that constant search.

And, and then yes I have the incredible, incredible opportunity of learning from sisters and brothers in all those conversations I'm not there, as the erudite giver. I have a piece to give from what God's given me but I have a lot to learn from others and their, their expressions of faith and their own search for for an understanding and and living out of God's calling in their lives too.

Chris: what you're describing, it sounds to me, and I did my doctoral work too and all that but it sounds to me like a very different way of engaging academics and especially theology than what many of us in North America are used to.

I think you use the word sometimes of transformation, theology for transformation. Could you say a little bit more about that?

Ruth: Happily. To me, yes, there's just there's a problem with the conception of theology as if it were just the system of ideas that you need to grab on to no repeat and get others to repeat, just like it's a system of thought. Too often for too many people it's so distant from life.

To me theology is more of a verb than a noun. We do theology. Oui, oui, oui, oui theology is, as we live in obedience. That brings us insights and the Holy Spirit reveals the purpose isn't to fill up our heads with knowledge. The purpose is to live my faithfully to to communally Express God's good purposes for God's world that's the purpose of theology. And so it's not to puff up our pride.

It's to, to make us better servants. And, and so, to me, part of the issue is the approach to Scripture. If we look at scripture as a code of law, or we look at scripture as a, as a conjunction of doctrines, but rather instead come at it.

As the story of a people of God's people blundering, and and searching for faithfulness along the way of life in the midst of their cultures in the midst of the historical moment.

So look at it as story and say this is the story were invited into in the world there are so many stories available to us about what life is far about who we live more about what we what we value.

But we're invited into this story by God's grace through, through Christ and the work of the Spirit. And so, how do we live in to that story. It's energizing then theology doesn't become this dry, kind of set of just ideas I have to assent to theology becomes an exciting endeavor, because it has to do with life.

It's fun life, it's our life. And that's what we seek in our theological school allows so it's just this isn't about just getting people to, to, quote, big names theologians, this is about living.

Karen: Yeah. That's powerful. You know, there reminds you Chris and I were talking earlier today, Ruth about how you know I know when I first had my kids many years ago that the talk was well it's important to pass on your faith kind of like you pass on grandma's China to your, you know, passing on I hear you, right here yeah and and you know, as, as, yeah I mean, clearly it's, we don't pass on faith like China, we help our kids live into and live out of it.

And, you know as one who is a mother of many. I'm wondering you know what would you say to a parent who's who's like why I just thought I had to take them to church and, you know, or send them to a particular school or sign them up for a mentoring program. What does it look like to live into an out of faith with your kids?

Ruth: Yeah, I think that's hugely important thing. And, and we can't as parents just say okay let's let the church do it, because the way we live speaks so much to our kids. It's not just about what we tell them more about having a devotional reading it's the coherence between what we say we believe, and how we live. That speaks more than any amount of words. And so I think that for our kids to be able to be provoked in to be be a walking into that integrity. I know that that you know you would say oh my dad was a big theologian he was the pastor.

What was it like growing up like that. And how did I come into faith? Maybe even in spite of having a dad as a pastor and for some people that are dari, yeah, oh yeah, right.

And to me, the key was the integrity, was the fact that my parents lived what they spoke, that they they incarnated the values that they were promoting through their teaching and preaching and and such. And so that that was a key ingredient for me that I sought to bring into my family life.

And I was, for example, that a couple of my kids are not churchgoers right now.

And obviously as a parent that's like, Oh, well, what, what are they going to, you know, know but

I'm in a couple years back I was preaching, I had the privilege of preaching in a church in Colorado, and having my three biological kids, along with me.

And when the service finished they said, Mom, if, if, if church, and preaching were what you just did. I would be going to church every Sunday.

And I asked them well why what what's the difference between what you heard today and the others, and it was the same point, it was like you just spoke out of, out of your own search to live faithfully and the problem I see too often in the church is all these great ideas cranked out and repeated on Sunday, and then people live like everybody else. The rest of the week.

And so, I need to see it I need to see the authenticity and that's what our young people need they need to church and faith is not a little add on church and I mean faith is something that filters through the whole of our life should impact the way we live, day in and day out, and that is a witness to invite our kids into that story. Right. So, if we go back to that, that analogy of passing on grandma's china.

You don't just pass on it that china need to have it had to have been eaten on it had to have been used maybe, maybe there's some plates are broken and shift because you live with that china that right.

Karen: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Chris: Your work with Resonate, your work with the theological communities that you're a part of involves leadership training. Training up the next generation of leaders in the church. How, why do you see that as important, maybe in the big picture but probably more specifically, what are you learning from them, as you as you walk with them? How, how is your kind of face your worldview being challenged and shaped by this act of walking alongside the next generation.

Ruth: Yes, it's, it's a constant nourishment I receive from the questions from the, from the struggles from the proposals of the younger people, or older people that are involved in, in, in these processes. I think they keep me on my toes, in terms of just really not thinking, Oh, I've arrived. I know it all. I'm the teacher, I'm the leader, so I'm there and I just need others to follow me, because really what we all need is to follow Jesus.

And so, and so that questions the struggles and the proposals of my students have of that of the young volunteers here in best that though they they keep me, searching, they keep me alive. They keep me, seeking daily bread from God, rather than settling into Oh my, comfortable established position or something. So I am definitely revitalized constantly by by the people I engage with.

I can't imagine how my life would be without it.

Karen: Ruth you're the community in which you live just did it.

I'm guessing it gets messy. Sometimes your, your life is intersecting with people whose lives are challenging. I'm wondering what gives you hope where, where are you seeing hope?

Ruth: Yeah, they're definitely extremely messy. We're all messy. We use the symbol of the metaphor of week. Our community is called Casa Adobe adobe house and if you know what Adobe's are Adobe's are mud bricks. They are fragile, they are, they need constant reworking to not fall apart, and particularly our community, given that several of us have gone through extremely traumatic experiences in life.

We're all very broken. So I don't want to depict cut some delicious perfect thing we bring the pain and our brokenness into the present, and we actually currently have been for several months wrestling with some, some interrelations some interpersonal issues that that need healing.

So, but in the midst of it I guess. Yeah, if I had to bank on our capacity, I would not, I wouldn't be giving up. I would be closing down that side of it and moving to some little place with my husband.

But, but, but I don't I'm not counting on our personal expertise or capacity I'm only counting on God's grace and God's provision and God's good purposes. And then it's like, you know, when you plant seeds and they start sprouting. And you see that in spite of all our messiness, they're all these little sprouts in the neighborhood in the kids that are being mentored and tutored in in the life of our students in the in the inset the the the theological school and and witnesses of people being encouraged so you see the fruit, you see these expressions of something that are far beyond are doing.

And that is God at work. And that is encouraging and just the confidence of holding on to the fact that God hasn't abandoned the world, even though Colvin, and so much death and in Latin America I don't know if you know the news but I mean people talkabout India but Latin America, the whole of Latin America is way off the charts in terms of the, the whole impact of the pandemic and and the lack of availability of vaccines and the lack of hospital beds and lack of oxygen and people dying.

It is dire and and and it's burdensome It's heavy. It's, it's really, it's, Yeah, it's tough. And so part of that is just clinging to the hope that God is God and God is good and God's purposes are going to come to fruition. At some point, and, and, and remaining faithful in that, as a community, and I loved a line by somebody I don't even know that I can quote it properly but it's like when our faith dwindles, we can, we can be carried by the faith of our of our community.

And so, even at times when I just despair. Yeah. I need not just start actually follow on my own strength because I don't even have it, but I can rest on the, on the faith of others, and they can see me through. And then it'll be somebody else's turned to be carried.

Karen: Yeah.

Chris: It's such a real rich description of being the body of Christ and belonging to the body of Christ. Many times, as I'm interacting and probably with a lot with the next generation of folks to who are questioning church. One of the things they'll say is people aren't real. By that, We come to worship on Sunday and everything looks like each other.

And and the question is how can I live up to that and how can I be real, and where can I go with my doubts and my struggles in it, it feels like they don't belong because they have struggles, but you're describing belonging to the church because you have struggles.

Ruth: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. And that goes back to that point of integrity. I mean, you don't have to keep up a facade of perfect faith and perfect strength and perfect everything.

And too often, that's the problem is where we're, you know when you go back to the New Testament, and you see the struggles of that church of those house churches, they were real, and the letters.

Paul and John's the letters and then you testament reveal that the messiness the brokenness that

the the strife, that the struggle of these communities.

And at the same time, They were being witnesses to God's work and and inviting others into a new way of life into the story of God's grace in a way that had healed repercussions across the Empire. And that's the call right from the small and the real be authentic. And the capacity to lament say things are not right.

Karen: Yeah, I'm wondering if you know and you mentioned young adults and I think that that that I have young adults too and I think that that's, that is, that's their challenge right it's like what I'm seeing on Sunday is not what I'm seeing during the week and what I am, what I would I see during the week I'd love to see on Sunday, during worship and, you know, we talk a lot about storytelling and the importance of storytelling I'm wondering is, is that something that's also woven into your intentional community and, because that gets to our authenticity.

Ruth: Yes, yes, yes. And that's where I mean that's why, to me. The doing a theology is a weaving of stories. It's the story of God's good purposes it's the story of God's people through time and it's our stories today, and our wrestling and our, our, our imperfection, and our joys and our and our successes.

But it's not just all about performance and success, it's about it all and life has all that messiness and I think in some ways. I really think my own. Walk has been significantly marked also by loss and grief and and the the the murder of my husband. In, years ago, and just having to walk through that, in a way, it was like, either you pretend it away and close down a part of who you are.

Or you walk through the pain and the loss and the ugliness and the questions of it. And, and then you learn to live with pain and loss and lament and learning to live with it forces you to be more authentic and I'm not upholding myself as a model but I'm just.

My point is that if we try to just push the ugly pieces of life aside and don't allow God's Spirit to shed light into them. And, and, and, and just, just kind of an end if we're not willing to live with. What's not great you know we pretend it's not there. We are not a part of who we are and we don't allow God's work to affect the whole of life. And and I think we're called into being those people that are. Yeah, those my bricks. Yeah.

Chris: Well, Ruth as you're talking I just I keep thinking of myself. I am so grateful for the generous posture with which you are sharing your story today. It is. It's a there's a humility and what you're saying. There's a willingness to share both grief and joy, which we've seen you share in the conversation.

It's, I can say safely in many of the North American church conversations I get in. We don't get into this type of real life conversation and often stays abstract and on the surface, and so there's something about how you're even saying things today that. I find my, my heart being warmed and encouraged myself going. This is good, and this is right. And so, thank you for the way you're, you're being vulnerable and and sharing your story with us.

Ruth: Now, Chris, it, it hasn't come easy, but it has been a walk of. It goes back to what you talked about belonging to the body. Because when, when I mean my husband was my late husband was murdered in Ecuador and you might know of the story of those missionaries back in the day that were murdered by the indigenous people and. And so when he died and we were missionaries and everything. There was like this kind of surge of attention like oh poor widow and you know and, and, and, and I just kind of cringed at the publicity around it.

And so my first reaction was like No, this is my story, this is my, this is my life, and, and I don't need to be going public about this stuff. And there was a. I feel a gifting of God and just giving me time to be more to work through my, my process but I came to a point where I realized, you know, what we live as children of God as members of Christ body. It's not just ours. It's because we, we owe it to each other to witness to what God is doing in our lives, in spite of us to do less with us.

And so it was a maturing process of saying, I, this isn't about me. This is about God's work. And, and I just need to kind of step into that stream. And if my experience is can be an encouragement to others. I owe it. And so I can just kind of release myself in this mix and yeah that's been part of the process and so when I first shared some of my reflections.

With within iff, the International fellowship of evangelical students that in Traverse City in the US. Some, some just sharing some of my reflections about where God had been in the midst of this situation. I had people coming from several different countries that were suffering a lot of strife and a lot of violence and a lot of deaths, and they found it encouraging and to me that was just like a confirmation, we all we all are stories and allowing God to weave them into God's story. So we need not be protecting ourselves or hiding things. We can be there for one another.

Karen: That's so encouraging you know, we talk a lot about learning God's story finding your place in God's story but we don't often add on, and talking with others sharing with others how you have found your place in God's story and was doing it right that's that third burn you know i think it's it's easy to stop at hear God's story find your place and and keep it to yourself.

So thank you for that reminder of being authentic and honest and humble and open and being okay and mess up as we are all messy.

Ruth, we saw the Open to wonder Podcast kind of has this logo.

That's like a pew. Only is not in church, it's sitting outside on the grass. And we chose that it's kind of like a Pew park bench outside on the grass because we really want to think outside of those walls, you're going to some parks.

I here in Canada, there's a few and elsewhere in the world there's a little section in a park called speakers corner where sometimes there's a podium and stand there and and let let people around know the thing that they would want them to know.

I'm wondering if you're if we imagine where you and Chris and I are sitting on our Pew bench in the park. And, and you wander over to that little speakers corner section. What would you want people to know about intentional faith formation, or faith formation, or God at work in your life what's what's one thing that you think, I just, I wish people knew this.

Ruth: Hmm, that's a tough one, one kind of core thing.

I guess maybe it would be that are.

We can't form, faith, just by adding up proper doctrines and ideas. We grow, we can only and we can't. And we never really arrived. We never own faith. It's a journey. And it's a journey that demands all we are. it involves and impacts every corner of us. And that us isn't only me, that us is us. It's plural. It involves others. We are, we are shaped by the relationships we value. We are shaped by how we relate.

We are essentially communal beings, God, God is community. And God created us in God's image as community. And so, it's never an individual journey. It is a journey, but it's not my journey and our journey. And, and, and we only add so it's so it necessarily is our faith is nurtured strengthened, as we seek right relations right relationship with God right relations with one another right relations with the rest of creation and and that's what's going to be seen. It's not seen and me being able to say a lot of nice words it's not seeing, it's not even exclusively in doing nice things for people. It's in right relations that's that's the core that's why God, Jesus summed up the law, love God, love your neighbor, and you can't love your neighbor without loving the rest of creation because, because it's it's it's the hope that we share. And so I think that would be my call. Let's continue seeking to nourish healthy equal nourishing ongoing Lee nourishing relations. That's life.

Chris: Thank you, Ruth.

We are so grateful for your time with us today, and for this conversation. For those who are listening, you can find Ruth on Facebook, or you can write to her by email her address is our idea divorced at CRC and a.org. And we will make sure that gets put in the episode notes so that people can follow up with you, Ruth.

I would also say and Karen would add to that, if you do a little search of Ruth on Google, you will find a treasure trove of talks and speeches and encouraging words.

Her insight and wisdom shines through. As well as her passion, which came through clearly today. So, thank you. Thank you again Ruth, we are so blessed to have this time with you today.