

{103} Women in Ministry [Anna O'Connor]

[00:00:00] **Katie Axelson:** Welcome to Have Hope; Will Travel. I'm your host, Katie Axelson. Today I'm here with one of my real life friends, um, Anna O'Connor. Anna and I met through church. Um, actually, neither of us go to that church anymore. Um, we met through church, and, um, we have a lot in common, particularly our passion for women in ministry, um, which is what we're going to chat about today.

[00:00:34] **Katie Axelson:** And we happened to just miss each other in Vermont last week by a whole one day, and so we're very sad about that. But, Anna, welcome to the show.

[00:00:42] **Anna O'Connor:** Thanks, Katie. Yeah, when you asked me when I was going to Vermont and we shared the dates, we were so bummed that we were literally one day away.

[00:00:52] **Katie Axelson:** Literally, I left the day before she arrived.

[00:00:54] **Katie Axelson:** We were so close. We have pictures in the same place from two days apart.

[00:00:59] **Anna O'Connor:** But I was grateful for your recommendations. I was like, I need friends to go scope out my trip spots for all of my future trips. So this is just, I didn't know I needed it.

[00:01:10] **Katie Axelson:** I will gladly scope out all of your trips, but I would rather go on trips with you.

[00:01:15] **Katie Axelson:** I, I agree. Yeah. Yeah. Yes. So Anna, um, you are in a very different season of life than you were when we first met. Um, so why don't you share a little bit about, um, Who you are and what brought you to this place right now.

[00:01:31] **Anna O'Connor:** Yes, um, yeah. My name's Anna. I currently live in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, um, with my husband and our two obnoxious dogs, um, who we love very much.

[00:01:44] **Anna O'Connor:** But, uh, yeah, I am currently a seminary MDiv. I am in year three, and I'm also currently serving as a youth pastor at a church in Minneapolis. But when we first met, I was, felt very called to go to seminary, and I remember touching base with you, Katie, and you had said that you had your MDiv, and, kind of like a moth to the light.

[00:02:11] **Anna O'Connor:** I was like, I need to talk to her. She knows things that I just feel compelled to know and to learn and, um, just stepping into spaces that I just feel like compelled to step into. And so that was just a huge bright spot in my journey as well. But yeah, I studied business and marketing for my undergrad degree, which is not the most direct route to ministry.

[00:02:42] **Anna O'Connor:** So as, as people talk about their calls to ministry and they go to Bible school or they go, um, kind of in these really direct pathways, I have just been really passionate about the non direct pathways because, yeah, I studied marketing, went into agency world for a little bit. went into working for an organization that helped churches get loans.

[00:03:08] **Anna O'Connor:** So I had all these experiences of like working closely with the church without working for the church and something just was still pushing me to go take one more step further, one more step. And so a few years ago I finally applied for seminary and there was this really beautiful moment one week before I started classes where, um, our current pastor had reached out and just said, Hey, by the way, this church is hiring a youth pastor.

[00:03:42] **Anna O'Connor:** Let me know if you'd be interested. And it was one of those moments where I felt like my world completely shifted. I hadn't even started classes yet. And I was like, I I was just going to seminary as a generic ministry degree, master's degree, but now I want to go for my MDiv. I see myself as a pastor. I want to be this youth pastor.

[00:04:08] **Anna O'Connor:** I've never thought about this before, but just one of those really holy moments of feeling like everything changed. And so that was, um, Just, yeah, kind of life changing. And so, ended up applying, and I'm currently working at that church now, and loving it.

[00:04:27] **Katie Axelson:** That's so awesome. I'm so glad that you went for it, because first of all, I remember when you were just like, oh my gosh, um, I have so many questions, um, and I, thank you for referring to me as a bright spot in that questioning, because I remember those questions, um, and it, it felt like at that time, it was.

[00:04:45] **Katie Axelson:** I don't know, maybe something you hadn't said out loud before, or hadn't really thought about before. Um, and there we were, two women sitting on my couch, kind of exploring this idea together. Um, did you know a lot of women in ministry, like growing up or recently?

[00:04:59] **Anna O'Connor:** Yes, so I, um, I was actually baptized by a female pastor.

[00:05:05] **Katie Axelson:** Really? I didn't know that.

[00:05:06] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah. Yeah. So the church I grew up in, um, was very, um, egalitarian. I don't love the divisive terms, but we're just going to run with it for the sake of, um, this conversation. Um, and so there's this really cool moment my senior year of high school where I was asked to give the senior sermon that was part of their senior send off for their high schoolers.

[00:05:31] **Anna O'Connor:** And, um, Our lead pastor, a man, asked me if I was ever interested in ministry, and I was like, Nah, that's not for me. I just, that was just your version of a compliment, was kind of honestly what I thought, was he was like, Oh, she's good at this, I'm just gonna ask her if she's ever thought about it, as a compliment, not actually.

[00:05:55] **Anna O'Connor:** Um, calling anything out of me or marking anything, but looking back, that is what happened. Um, so growing up, that was my context, and then for a little bit, I ended up in a context where women couldn't be pastors, and I really wrestled with, um, just the scriptures in that time. I was like, okay, I can see it from this perspective and they really love the Lord.

[00:06:26] **Anna O'Connor:** And I, I could get there, uh, mentally, and then just kind of through different churches and different church, I don't know, jumps or changes, I found myself in more egalitarian spaces again. So it was kind of like, yes, I grew up with it and then lost it for a little bit and then have been fortunate to find.

[00:06:50] **Anna O'Connor:** spaces where I can practice and kind of do what I feel called to do.

[00:06:54] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah, that's awesome. And I'm glad that you were able to kind of process it from both sides, really, because you're like, well, I grew up and this was normal, and then it wasn't normal, and now it is normal, and I'm part of it, um, because that's a big shift.

[00:07:07] **Anna O'Connor:** It really is. And I, I feel fortunate that I haven't had to do, um, a lot of unwinding of belief systems around this, whereas I know a lot of my classmates and other, like, female leaders that I lead with that have had to really, really deeply wrestle with childhood beliefs of, um, whether or not they can do what they sense God telling them to do and, um, but I'm also grateful for.

[00:07:38] **Anna O'Connor:** the unity of the church, and that is one area that I feel passionate about also is, hey, we can do this together if we respect one another's beliefs and kind of really put the first things first. And so that is one of the gifts that I feel like having been in both spaces that has offered me.

[00:07:59] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah, that's awesome, and I am one of those women who had to wrestle with it, and I mean, we've talked about this too, of like, I felt like I grew up in a church where women couldn't do that, um, and I felt like the Lord had given me a gifting and a calling that, sure, looked an awful lot like ministry, but then he gave me this anatomy that doesn't seem to fit that calling, and I was like, Lord, did you know what you were doing here?

[00:08:19] **Katie Axelson:** Um, and really wrestled with it, um, And then ultimately was like, no, no, no, like, okay, let's look at some of those scriptures. Let's look at the tradition of the church. Let's look at the tradition of history and culture and be like, okay, men control the narrative. So yeah, this is oppressive. Um, and just kind of wrestled through that.

[00:08:38] **Katie Axelson:** Um, and then found, I found a lot of freedom, um, in the like, no, you, you can't actually do that. Um, I also had a professor in college. I had two majors in college, neither of which were religion, but one of my religion professors was like, you should be a religion major. And I also thought it was just his version of a compliment of like trying to recruit for his department.

[00:08:56] **Katie Axelson:** And I was like, Dr. Williams, I already have two majors. Two majors. And he's like, you can do three. Um, I have, I think we're still Facebook friends, but I've since lost contact with Dr. Williams, but I want to be like, Dr. Williams, type of pastor now. Um, I don't work at a church, but I have an MDiv now. You do work at a church.

[00:09:17] **Katie Axelson:** So tell us what does ministry look like for you in your world right now?

[00:09:21] **Anna O'Connor:** Yes, I get to be a youth pastor and young adults are also under my, um, kind of pastoral umbrella as well. Uh, so sixth and 12th graders are the folks that I interact with the most, which is so fun. I love telling people that I work with middle schoolers and high schoolers and watch the blood drain from their face and just want to know why I do that.

[00:09:51] **Anna O'Connor:** They just think I'm crazy. And, and then they'll usually follow it up with, thank you so much for doing that. Um, which is just so funny, but I, yeah, we get to, Learn about God together on Wednesday nights, and it's been such a good journey for me in learning what the ministry of presence is in just showing up consistently and My students had a lot of turnover, which that's not unique for a lot of youth groups in today's world, but I'm coming up on just over a year, and I just, those relationships are so much stronger than they were, and then what I thought they should be last year, which has also been just a growth for me of leaning into the sustainability of ministry, and what does it mean to believe that there's abundance, even when the time together feels really, really scarce.

[00:10:53] **Anna O'Connor:** And just believing that God has so much goodness for young people and for our church, both present and future. And yeah, that can happen through playing crazy games and laughing and, um, trying to get the middle school boys to pay attention for the fifth time. And I, I do feel like an abundance of patience from the Holy spirit, uh, in this area, which is, Just, I don't know, something really special that I, I have yet to be truly, truly annoyed.

[00:11:30] **Katie Axelson:** That's good. In a year, a little over a year. Right? That's awesome.

[00:11:35] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah. I, I just, I had a youth pastor when I caught up with her when I was in college, I reached out to her and we grabbed coffee and we were talking about, um, middle schoolers specifically. And she said, you know, it's just a time where you bring in the awkward and you push out love.

[00:11:54] **Anna O'Connor:** Bring in the awkward and push out love. And that's really just been kind of a motivating motto for me as I've entered into this space.

[00:12:06] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah. Um, I have so much respect for youth pastors because they are in the thick of it. Like, everywhere where, uh, Awkwardness, like immaturity and growth, culture collide.

[00:12:17] **Katie Axelson:** It's youth ministry. And I think a lot of times we in churches see youth ministry as like a stepping stone role to lead pastorhood or whatever that's going to look like. And for some people that is how it works. But don't undermine the time that's spent in youth ministry because that's, I want to say, one of the hardest jobs in the church.

[00:12:35] **Anna O'Connor:** It has been surprisingly robust of a role. I think that's the word I'm going to use. Um, there was a, someone from a local school that I was talking to that said he respects the hustle of youth ministry.

[00:12:51] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah. And

[00:12:52] **Anna O'Connor:** I really sat with that in just, Kind of reckoning with, what is my life now? I don't work in corporate, my life does look like a free Monday morning, but a meeting on Zoom in the evening, and staff meetings on Tuesday, and last minute prep for youth group Wednesday morning, all the way until 8:30 when the students leave the building, and just kind of going to a volleyball game on Thursday night, and the Swiss cheese. Kind of calendar, um, in order to just be where students are and to show them that you care and show them that they matter and that by us doing that, it tells them that God does the same thing.

[00:13:35] **Anna O'Connor:** Like God believes that you matter. God loves you. God is here for you. Um, and that's just such a privilege to be able to step into that space and point students. Thanks. To who God is in those ways. Also.

[00:13:51] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah, the Swiss cheese calendar. That's a new one for me. I like that. It's it's real. It's it's real. Um, tell us a little bit about like the staff at your church because you're a predominantly female staff.

[00:14:04] **Anna O'Connor:** We are, uh, yes. So we have three pastoral staff. All of us are women. Um, the, our other two office folks are women. So we currently, at our staff meetings, don't have a male presence. Which, right, right? Um, which I have felt strongly about. very fortunate in some regards, uh, just to be able to be under that leadership.

[00:14:34] **Anna O'Connor:** And yeah, there's so much I could say about that. You can ask follow up questions, but at the same time, I'm also realizing as a young person in ministry, I am missing the coworking of men and women together at the same time. And so I'm just grateful that both of those things can be true, that I can be grateful for strong female leadership and to just recognize,

oh yeah, I want to have male colleagues that push me and that we can, um, yeah, just build ministry and serve God's people together.

[00:15:15] **Katie Axelson:** I personally find that that's when the church is the strongest, when men and women are working as colleagues together in pastoral ministry.

[00:15:21] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah, I've been, uh, grateful. The denomination that I'm with places a strong emphasis on, uh, inter church network and, uh, ministry and collaboration and fellowship.

[00:15:36] **Anna O'Connor:** And I've been able to meet a lot of really cool male youth pastors through that as well, which is just awesome. It's fun to have different friends from around the state, from around the Midwest that are serving in different contexts and you can share ideas and you can share strategies or encouragements or sorrows and doing that together has been just really, really special.

[00:16:02] **Katie Axelson:** That's awesome. What have you found are some of the challenges that you have with an all female staff?

[00:16:08] **Anna O'Connor:** Challenges of an all female staff. I, I realized that I think we think very similarly. So there was a moment this summer where I was on a youth trip and I had my male co leader because We have female and male leaders to lead our students.

[00:16:30] **Anna O'Connor:** And as we were talking, I was realizing that I was trying to predict what he was going to say. And he just kept not like what he had to say did not fit the mold of what I expected. And I realized that so often in my work context, we think super similarly, and we haven't done a full GIFS assessment to fully realize the differences or similarities.

[00:16:55] **Anna O'Connor:** But We've gotten into this rhythm of just, yeah, we, for the most part, understand each other and can kind of predict where we're going and part of that is just working well together. But I think part of it is all being female staff. And so it was this moment of realizing, Oh, I actually don't know how this man is thinking.

[00:17:20] **Anna O'Connor:** And I think I do. And yeah, doing ministry alongside someone who thinks differently than you is so good. And I was just running up against that cultural intellectual difference in those moments.

[00:17:36] **Katie Axelson:** Sure, sure. What are some of the beautiful things of being an adult female staff?

[00:17:41] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah, I would say the emotional support has been really, really phenomenal as, um, As someone who has gone through a lot of stuff personally as I've stepped into ministry, our staff has just been a very, very safe place to bring the joys, bring the sorrows, to call up staff members on a random day and just say, I'm struggling.

[00:18:15] **Anna O'Connor:** And I think the emphasis placed on relationship and relational and emotional safety has been a really, really beautiful Part of this.

[00:18:26] **Katie Axelson:** That's awesome. Have you I bet your experience is different because you're in an all female staff But I'm gonna ask that question Anyway, have you found that maybe the congregation or maybe the other youth pastors that you work with or others just in the community?

[00:18:40] **Katie Axelson:** Have a hard time receiving your pastoral leadership because you're all women.

[00:18:46] **Anna O'Connor:** That is a great question and I have not experienced or identified that As being a woman, but honestly, just lack of experience and age. Sure. I think sometimes when, um, When I have something to say, I just notice that it doesn't land with as much palpability as I pictured in my head.

[00:19:11] **Anna O'Connor:** And there could be a lot of different reasons for that. It could be my delivery wasn't actually as strong as I thought it was in my head. It could be, uh, I'm still getting to know this community and I don't know how to best communicate something that feels important to me. But I also feel like part of it is just being young and the role of youth pastor has a bad reputation for not being taken seriously.

[00:19:39] **Anna O'Connor:** And while I don't think that is As much part of my context, I've received a lot of respect in my current role as the youth person. But I do think that sometimes being the youngest on staff is what kind of loses credibility a little

[00:19:57] **Katie Axelson:** bit. Yeah, I can see that. That does make a difference. Um, I'm glad that the men have not been Annoying in their authoritarianism or misogyny, regarding you, because I experienced that.

[00:20:15] **Katie Axelson:** I had, I had a member of our church one time tell me it was nice to have a good looking pastor. Excuse me. Oh no. He said that to my face with another man in the conversation.

[00:20:25] **Anna O'Connor:** No.

[00:20:26] **Katie Axelson:** I excused myself and the other man handled it, but.

[00:20:31] **Anna O'Connor:** No one tells male pastors that.

[00:20:33] **Katie Axelson:** Yep. You're right. It was one of those, I can't believe I just heard it

[00:20:39] **Anna O'Connor:** Except maybe a--

[00:20:40] **Katie Axelson:** Except Maybe a very attractive pastor .

[00:20:42] **Anna O'Connor:** Oh, I was gonna say a very, very old lady.

[00:20:46] **Katie Axelson:** Oh yeah, fair. Maybe a very, very attractive pastor hears that sometimes. But a woman hears it all the time. Um, so I'm glad that that's not your experience.

[00:20:56] **Katie Axelson:** Me too, so far.

[00:20:59] **Katie Axelson:** If it ever is, you better call me. We'll debrief it together.

[00:21:02] **Anna O'Connor:** I will

[00:21:02] **Katie Axelson:** We'll be a support group.

[00:21:04] **Anna O'Connor:** I promise.

[00:21:05] **Katie Axelson:** But I hope it doesn't happen. We'll What do you feel like is God's call, um, for your ministry life?

[00:21:10] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah, that's okay, the idea of pastors having a ministry is still a new concept to me, in terms of, what is my ministry? And my ministry is brought to the different contexts that I serve in.

[00:21:30] **Katie Axelson:** Ooh, yeah.

[00:21:31] **Anna O'Connor:** And That, like, how I show up, like, what is my ministry if I ever become a chaplain? Or if I ever become an associate pastor or the executive director of a para church ministry? What is my ministry?

[00:21:46] **Katie Axelson:** Or the senior pastor. Let's not rule it out, Anna.

[00:21:49] **Anna O'Connor:** Or a senior pastor, okay....

[00:21:51] **Anna O'Connor:** I, I've been thinking about that as, just as a concept. And so just putting that out there that that's a newer idea for me. Um, but I have been really fortunate in my seminary studies. The program that I'm in is really focused on personal formation and the idea that you have to know yourself really well and to know your strengths and to also know your temptations and where you look for affirmation outside of.

[00:22:28] **Anna O'Connor:** the Lord and just being aware of this is the root of really good leadership and being able to pursue the Lord and pursue God, um, regardless of kind of what's going on and the Holy Spirit helps you do that, right? And from there, that's where your leadership flows. And so in this, as I think of kind of my ministry, I am learning a lot about myself in this first couple of years.

[00:22:59] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah, in that I just think of warmth and presence and people tell me a lot that I have. a friendly face.

[00:23:08] **Katie Axelson:** You do.

[00:23:09] **Anna O'Connor:** Which feels so funny to me, but it's been a consistent theme that I'm like, oh, wait, God can actually use this.

[00:23:18] **Katie Axelson:** And

[00:23:20] **Anna O'Connor:** when I've thought of mentors or people that I have admired, I've realized, oh, sometimes they look like me and I feel more connection towards them.

[00:23:30] **Anna O'Connor:** And I literally went at one of my jobs, I would have to go through church websites And there's this one female pastor that had very similar features to me, and I just went and I looked up all the sermons that

she had ever preached, and I felt just inspired by her. And that's one of those areas where representation really matters.

[00:23:54] **Anna O'Connor:** I felt inspired just because I saw someone that I might look like 20 years from now doing something that I was inspired to do.

[00:24:03] **Katie Axelson:** Let's pause there for a second because representation does matter. I, um, attended a church in Minneapolis for a while. I wasn't, like, a member. I didn't even talk to anybody. I just would slide in as the service was starting and slide out as the service was leaving.

[00:24:18] **Katie Axelson:** But one of the associate pastors looked like she could be my sister. And that was one of the most beautifully redemptive things in my life, to see this person who looks like me, physically looks like me, come to my church. Um, doing this job that I am now equipped and called to do, but I'm not currently acting in.

[00:24:37] **Katie Axelson:** Um, and I really wonder if men experience that. Because we are so much the minority and I think there's so much like diversity and male leadership and so not only to find another female pastor like I feel like any other female pastor is heavily influential, but to find a female pastor who physically looks like me.

[00:24:56] **Katie Axelson:** Um, it makes a huge difference and it helps me understand the perspective of others who look physically different than the general public in whatever capacity that looks like to see others. Like them doing positive things that are positively impacting the world.

[00:25:13] **Anna O'Connor:** Absolutely. And I, I've encouraged people to go to different churches where there is leadership that looks like them.

[00:25:20] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah. Because I'm like, this is important for you. If you feel called into leadership, into ministry, this is, I have known how important this is for me. I want that for you. And as you are getting your feet underneath you. If, if you feel called to do something different at another time, God will be with you and God's grace will be with you.

[00:25:43] **Anna O'Connor:** But if you want to be encouraged and inspired by people who look like you, that is okay. Like go and be inspired.

[00:25:54] **Katie Axelson:** Um, I think it's also valuable on the flip side of like making sure that we're listening to different voices and not just the people who

look like us. Um, so we'll include that disclaimer too, but that's not relevant to the conversation we're having at hand.

[00:26:03] **Katie Axelson:** So we're not going to dwell on it.

[00:26:06] **Anna O'Connor:** Absolutely 100 percent with you.

[00:26:08] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah. Um, tell us a little bit about what your MDiv program looks like.

[00:26:13] **Anna O'Connor:** Currently all online. I go to Bethel Seminary, and so if I wanted to take in person classes, it is down the road from me. I have that option. So far, I have enjoyed the flexibility of online so far, and so I have only taken online classes.

[00:26:31] **Anna O'Connor:** But I, yeah, I'm about halfway through my MDiv program. Um, And yeah, what else do you want to know about it? I'm curious.

[00:26:44] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah, what is your like schedule look like? What does the timeline look like that you're going to be in classes? What are some classes that have been impactful for you? Those types of questions.

[00:26:55] **Anna O'Connor:** Yes. Oh my goodness. I'm going to start with classes that have been impactful for me. And I, we had to take two versions or two levels of spiritual and personal formation. And the first one, it included drawing a genogram, which if you're not familiar is like a family tree with all your trauma represented in shapes and colors and dotted lines and solid lines.

[00:27:29] **Anna O'Connor:** And it was a wild experience for me. Is there a piece of paper big enough for that? No, I taped multiple pieces of paper together. I, which is great because now I always have it ready for any counseling intakes I ever do. I just say, here you go. Good luck. Good luck. Tell me what to do. Yeah. But I, I had this really spiritual experience doing that assignment.

[00:28:02] **Anna O'Connor:** I was sitting at a coffee shop and I was just doing my genogram and I, There's some, I, yeah, I'll just go into it. My, uh, grandparents were, they were killed in a car accident and I never met them. And I had this really profound interaction with. My great grandpa who was actually the driver of that car and this is gonna sound really I don't know spooky or whatever But it was the it was me talking to my great grandpa in the hospital room Telling him that it wasn't his fault telling him of the forgiveness that Jesus

offers of just I was just like preaching Uniquely to my great grandpa as I'm kind of just working on this You Assignment in this coffee shop and I started

[00:28:55] **Katie Axelson:** That never really happened

[00:28:56] **Anna O'Connor:** No, this was just kind of a vision that I felt like God gave me and I was just weeping in a coffee shop, which I don't do. Yeah, who who knew I don't usually cry in coffee shops but But I ended up reaching out to my professor who's also a spiritual director and she kind of helped me process this and it was part of just calling out like the impact that I am having on my family as I pursue ministry and how those words are good words, not just for my great grandpa, but for actually every single member of my family.

[00:29:34] **Anna O'Connor:** Wow. And they're the words that my parents need to hear. They're the words that my cousins need to hear. They're the words that I need to hear as The ripple effects of this traumatic event just flows through our family tree, and I see that physically on this piece of paper, and it was just one of those moments where, like I said, the personal formation really impacts your leadership and knowing where you come from, knowing your culture, knowing, um, the things that your family has been through can help just fuel your ministry and can actually be the places that you can bring, not you can bring, you can partner with the Holy Spirit to bring healing and wholeness because you have sought God in those areas as well and you've experienced those areas of wholeness and then you can pass it on.

[00:30:28] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah, that's good. That's good. How many classes do you take at a time?

[00:30:33] **Anna O'Connor:** one to two. Right now I'm on the one class a semester train. Before I was taking two, one semester I took three, would not recommend. Um, but right now I'm taking one, which is really fascinating. And The usual rhythms are returning assignments on Mondays, which really works out for kind of ministry life and Sundays being busy.

[00:31:00] **Anna O'Connor:** So Mondays, I'll usually kind of either do homework or start on the work for the week and submit things Monday nights and that's been a good rhythm generally.

[00:31:11] **Katie Axelson:** And is it asynchronous or you can do it at any time or are there live lectures you have to be part of?

[00:31:16] **Anna O'Connor:** It's asynchronous with sometimes we have to get into groups and coordinate a time for a live discussion with four people and so that's obviously synchronous.

[00:31:29] **Anna O'Connor:** There are people from all over the world taking this program, which like we talked about having different perspectives and different voices talking through what we're learning in theology is really awesome. And I would never have met these missionaries or a person living on this part of the globe or in this part of the country.

[00:31:51] **Anna O'Connor:** And it's been really fruitful. I've really enjoyed those conversations. Sometimes I go in and it's like, Oh, it's the one synchronous thing. And I can kind of come in with some heaviness around it, but I usually leave thinking that it was such a delightful conversation. And we're all here to pursue ministry and to do the same thing.

[00:32:10] **Anna O'Connor:** And It's just nice to be able to discuss theological texts with other people and not feel like we're in our own little head about it.

[00:32:19] **Katie Axelson:** That's great. And that's one of the like big concerns with online education of like, are you just in your own little head in your own little world or are you actually growing and listening to other voices?

[00:32:27] **Katie Axelson:** So that's really cool that there are at least some, um, synchronous elements where you can hear other people too. And so when you finish, whenever. That happens to be. Um, you will have an MDiv. What made you decide an MDiv versus any of the other biblical studies, theological studies, church leadership kind of degrees?

[00:32:49] **Anna O'Connor:** Well, when I asked you about it, you said, you said, with an MDiv, oh, how, okay, let me.

[00:33:00] **Katie Axelson:** I am not, I was not pitching for this. I did not know that this was going to be the answer, by the way.

[00:33:06] **Anna O'Connor:** I think you said something to the effect of. No one can tell you you're not qualified to do something if you have an MDiv.

[00:33:16] **Anna O'Connor:** And while that wasn't the driving factor, it was kind of a nice kind of boots on the ground, you've been in ministry, you've done it perspective. And one of the biggest things was how I saw myself of when I

was going in for a Masters of Ministry. I. Just thought wanted to get a Christian education because I'm a public school kid K through 16.

[00:33:46] **Anna O'Connor:** I joke. I went to public college and I just thought of as I can continue to be interested in the church and interested in nonprofit, which is I was kind of thinking nonprofit. Was the realm that I was thinking of because that's a natural business to non profit trajectory that made sense to me I was following what made sense to me and I was finding myself in a lot of Christian spaces a Master's in ministry would give me a master's degree would give me some biblical Scaffolding to understand why I'm doing what I'm doing, but oh no the MDiv that's for people who want to be pastors And so part of the call experience of when I mentioned earlier of thinking of myself as a pastor, feeling really called to this particular role, getting that text from our lead pastor, I thought it was just the grace of God that he didn't let me take one minute of seminary classes without thinking of myself as a pastor.

[00:34:51] **Anna O'Connor:** Wow. And that is how I, have just thought of that event of it was one week before I was going to start classes for my master's in ministry. And before classes even started, I was emailing the registrar asking if I can switch my degree program because I, I think that I'm called to this and I think I want to do this.

[00:35:12] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah. So that was what made the distinction between master's in ministry and MDiv, which I guess, defining terms, Master's of Divinity. We haven't officially defined that term yet. But MDiv is Master's of Divinity.

[00:35:27] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah. Um, I also have an MDiv and, um, I didn't know that's what you were going to answer. I didn't realize that that was impactful.

[00:35:33] **Katie Axelson:** I was impactful for you in that. Um, but that is something that I say consistently. Like, the MDiv is a beast of a degree. But if it's an option on the table, go for it. Um. Because it's, I mean, the biggest one of the, um, church related, um, master's degrees. I think, I'm pretty sure it's the biggest one. I have never heard of one that's bigger.

[00:35:53] **Katie Axelson:** Um, and really, like, Once you have an MDiv, people, people respect it differently. It's not just like a, like a one year degree. It's like a, no, that was a commitment and you did it. Um, so there's just a different level of, um, appreciation. And I feel like what I like about the MDiv

too, is you get to learn the like biblical history and you get to learn the church leadership stuff because the pastor is a leader.

[00:36:15] **Katie Axelson:** And so just reading scripture is only a fraction of what the job is. Um, there's also a huge portion of the job that is leadership and leading people well. Um, and so having the MDiv is, I feel like it's a good balance of both.

[00:36:26] **Anna O'Connor:** Absolutely. I, it's really funny. During the semester, I always think about dropping out or taking fewer classes next semester.

[00:36:36] **Anna O'Connor:** And then by the end of the semester, when all my papers are submitted, I'm researching Doctor of Ministry programs. I'm like, where do I want to go next? That was so fun. I love this. I can do another program. Let's continue my education before I've even finished this current degree. And it really just is, it's a beast, and it does funny things to your head, right?

[00:37:03] **Katie Axelson:** Yes. Um, I did hear someone once say that an MDiv is so much bigger than the other master's programs that it really should be a PhD program, or some sort of doctoral level program, because it's so big, hours wise.

[00:37:17] **Anna O'Connor:** Wow, I have not heard that, but I believe it. I think my program's 78 credits.

[00:37:23] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah, I, mine, credits were different in mine, um, and so I don't know how that totaled out, um, but I know the one that was at my college was 90.

[00:37:35] **Katie Axelson:** 90 credit hours. And most master's degrees are like 30 to 40. Um, but also we should have a moment to laugh at this. So a master's of divinity is abbreviated an MDiv. A doctor of ministry is abbreviated a D.Min . Which is why I

[00:37:53] **Anna O'Connor:** Which is why I said said doctor. " Doctor of Mministry/."

[00:37:57] **Katie Axelson:** I know, I know you did, but I wasn't gonna let you get away with it.

[00:38:01] **Katie Axelson:** It would have been misinterpreted had you just launched in with a " D.Min." I was gonna get a demon.

[00:38:05] **Anna O'Connor:** I was gonna get a demon. Yeah. Yep. Lots of demon programs out there.

[00:38:13] **Katie Axelson:** Um, so after you finish your MDiv, um, what do you think are like next steps that you're interested in. I know you've talked about a lot of different potentials, um, in terms of church leadership, in terms of nonprofit leadership, um, chaplaincy, the doctrine of ministry, like different options.

[00:38:32] **Katie Axelson:** Do you feel like there's one like goal that the Lord is highlighting for you in your life right now?

[00:38:38] **Anna O'Connor:** Honestly, no, there's no big, shiny object goal that I feel like I'm pursuing other than just being really in step with him. And part of that comes from feeling jaded about youth pastors being known for using youth ministry as a stepping stone.

[00:39:02] **Anna O'Connor:** And I came into this. Knowing that that's not what I want to do. Um, and at the same time, I am noticing areas that I feel really excited about when I get to serve in different areas and the beauty of serving at a small, medium sized church is I just get to kind of jump into everything, which is. Such a blessing early on in ministry and really any job.

[00:39:33] **Anna O'Connor:** And so I'm learning things about myself that I didn't know I could do or was passionate about, or even knew that there were jobs for, but that job just looks like a certain role in a ministry context. And so I. I'm just really in a season of commitment to my students, but also self discovery. So as I look to finishing my MDiv, that will probably look like getting licensed and hopefully ordained in the denomination that I'm serving in, but.

[00:40:05] **Anna O'Connor:** There's no role or job title that I'm looking at, but I do, every time I read about chaplaincy, it fascinates me. If there's any chaplains listening right now, I just have so much respect for you and I, the, the way that you can just walk into any situation and bring God's presence is wild to me. So I don't know if that is.

[00:40:33] **Anna O'Connor:** an area that I feel called to or just want to keep giving praise to the people that are doing it. Yeah. But that is an area that just seems really, really fascinating to me.

[00:40:46] **Katie Axelson:** So if you're a chaplain, you should reach out to Anna because she has questions about your job.

[00:40:51] **Anna O'Connor:** Yes, I would love to learn more. I, yeah, would love to learn more.

[00:40:57] **Katie Axelson:** Um, speaking of though, if people want to learn more from you, do you have an online presence we can point them to?

[00:41:03] **Anna O'Connor:** I do. They could follow me on Instagram. Uh, my handle is Anna_ Oconn. My last name's O'Connor. I think. Anna_ O'Connor was taken. So that is my main social media presence. I do sometimes upload things to a blog.

[00:41:24] **Anna O'Connor:** I wouldn't expect that though. And the link is in my bio. So if you want to check me out, Instagram is the best way to go.

[00:41:32] **Katie Axelson:** Perfect, . Um, yeah, I used to have a blog, and then I was in seminary, and then I didn't update it, so I feel you.

[00:41:38] **Anna O'Connor:** Yep, That's, that's how life has gone so far.

[00:41:41] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah, but Also just thinking about bringing praise to, um, chaplains.

[00:41:46] **Katie Axelson:** One of my friends who is a pastor told me a story of when they had a, um, Family emergency and were in the hospital. Um, the chaplain came and he goes, that chaplain was so awesome. And like he's retelling me this story later and he's like telling me about the medical emergency and then he is telling me about this chaplain and I was like, well, do you know this like chaplain's name or anything?

[00:42:03] **Katie Axelson:** He was like, yeah, he was a student at blah, blah blah, blah blah. And I was like, do you wanna call that school and tell them that their chaplain is awesome? And he's like, that's a great idea, . Um, and so just making sure that credit gets to where credit is due and that people's bosses know that they do a great job.

[00:42:19] **Anna O'Connor:** Absolutely. We did that with. our heater, our furnace guy at the church recently. The guy who came and fixed up our furnace before the winter was phenomenal. And we, we just called and we're like, your furnace guy was awesome. And they really appreciated that call.

[00:42:38] **Katie Axelson:** That's awesome . Um, what have I not asked you that you want to talk about?

[00:42:42] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah I think I would love, Maybe not ask you about, maybe ask you about, um, what did support look like for you when you were serving in ministry in terms of social support, emotional, I mean, just ministry support, because what I am realizing is it takes a village. to hold up a pastor.

[00:43:09] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah, it does.

[00:43:10] **Anna O'Connor:** And that is something that I underestimated, and I feel grateful that I have a lot of support, but I was surprised by how much I've needed to lean on them.

[00:43:23] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah.

[00:43:24] **Anna O'Connor:** And so I'm just wondering, what did that look like for you, Katie?

[00:43:26] **Katie Axelson:** I was gonna say, are you asking me this, or are we, um, am I asking you this? No, I'm asking you. Okay, great. Um, I feel like support for those in ministry is really tough. Um, because like we talked about a pastor is a leader, um, and a pastor is a leader of their congregation.

[00:43:45] **Katie Axelson:** And I have found in situations even where I am not in leadership because I have that title pastor, because I have those little letters after my name of the MDiv, there is a different level that I am held to, a different standard that I'm held to. And that's important and that's good. Um, but it also makes it hard to make friends, um, because I just need to be, have peers sometimes too.

[00:44:05] **Katie Axelson:** And so there are times when your only friends are pastors. Um, and that's good and beautiful and hard, um, but you need to have friends in all capacities. And so having friends who are pastors is hugely helpful, um, because they get it, they get the rigors of it. It also looks like, um, having friends who are not anywhere involved in your ministry context, like

having friends outside of, um, for me it's outside of the state, um, but I would say outside of the church, outside of the community of people where you can just be Katie or you can just be Anna. You don't have to be Pastor Anna or Pastor Katie. Um, you can just be who you are, because that gives you space to explore, um, and to wrestle, and to not have all the answers. Um, I, uh, I was serving at church this morning. I'm not currently on staff at a church. I have no desire to be, um, but was just serving like a normal member of the church.

[00:44:55] **Katie Axelson:** Um, and somebody who knows my background came up and asked me a really tough question. And I answered it, and I felt like I had to put my professional face on, um, and answer it professionally like a pastor. It didn't feel like it was a My Friend Katie question. Um, and so, uh, That happens, even just at a church where I'm a member, um, and I am happy to do that.

[00:45:20] **Katie Axelson:** Like, I love that, um, my leadership is recognized in that way, even if I'm not working at the church. Um, but it also sometimes makes it hard, because I'm like, I just want to be here to worship Jesus. Um, and so there is that fine line balance, and this is someone I have a relationship with and so I would never tell them no, um, and I felt very honored by the question.

[00:45:39] **Katie Axelson:** Um, but it just changes the dynamic is the point that I'm trying to make. I'm not trying to say, please don't do that to me, um, yeah, and so, uh, support is important. I also think it's really important for, um, pastors to have safe places where they can worship outside of the church where they're on staff.

[00:45:55] **Katie Axelson:** Um, and whether that means, um, physically worship or worship digitally, um, spaces where they can, to the same point, just go and, and be a worshiper of Jesus. Um, I remember I was guest preaching at, um, my Baptist church in North Carolina and the worship leader, the pastor, and I were all standing together.

[00:46:15] **Katie Axelson:** And the worship leader made a joke to the pastor of, Oh sure, bring somebody else in to do your job this week. It was a joke. It was definitely a joke. Um, the pastor stepped in front of me, so like, pushed me out of the conversation. Not, not rudely, but just stepped in front of me, looked at that worship leader and said, I have told you to find another worship leader so you can have a Sunday off.

[00:46:39] **Katie Axelson:** And like, that's important. Like, for my pastor to be able to have the Sunday off because I was preaching, for that worship leader to

have the Sunday off because a different, somebody is leading worship. Um, like, it's important to have that space to just be a child of God. I know what Sunday afternoons are like as a pastor.

[00:47:00] **Katie Axelson:** I know how you can critique yourself. Brutally, like I really genuinely think that on Sunday afternoons, the enemy uses pastors as punching bags, um, because everything you've said that day, every interaction you had is on replay in your head and you don't remember the positives. You only remember the negatives and you critique yourself.

[00:47:20] **Katie Axelson:** And guess what? Your congregation doesn't usually call out the positives either. They call out the negatives. You could have said this. You should have said that. Why didn't we do this? I didn't like that. I appreciate that everyone in the church wants to help make the church better, but those kind of constant critiques are exhausting to the leadership team.

[00:47:39] **Katie Axelson:** And so one thing that I do as a member of a church who also understands ministry is if I see something done really well, I'll celebrate it and call it out. Um, sometimes just privately, um, sometimes publicly, depending on what's going on. So if we've had some sort of an event, I can't say that I do it every single time, but I try to text somebody from the leadership team and say, Hey, I really appreciated this.

[00:48:00] **Katie Axelson:** Um, I don't want them to rely on my affirmation and my encouragement, but I want to be that support, um, for them because I get it.

[00:48:10] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah. No, I can answer your question. It, it did, it did. And I think back to specific texts or cards that I've gotten this year or emails, I think every pastor I've talked to has a folder physically and in their email of encouragement because it gets hard and sometimes we need to just look back at the positive things that people have sent us, um, not as an ego boost, but because.

[00:48:41] **Anna O'Connor:** The work is hard, and we get really hard on ourselves, and people expect a lot of us, and we so badly want to give them the care that they deserve and they're asking for, because that's, God is infinite, and we are not, and we rub up against that a lot.

[00:49:02] **Katie Axelson:** Yeah, absolutely. Um, and we are not God. We are flawed humans just like everyone else, Jesus died for us just as much as he died for anyone else.

[00:49:11] **Katie Axelson:** Um. But yeah, we are the people whose job it is to represent God. And that is a really high calling and a really high standard. Um, because we are never going to do it well enough, but we are going to be the representation of God on earth. Um, and that's not something we can ever lose sight of.

[00:49:32] **Anna O'Connor:** Amen. Amen.

[00:49:34] **Katie Axelson:** Well, no, this turned into a reverse podcast where I was answering all the questions.

[00:49:40] **Anna O'Connor:** I gotcha!

[00:49:40] **Katie Axelson:** You did. You did. You did. Um. We actually might have an episode coming up where I have asked someone else to interview me on my own show.

[00:49:48] **Anna O'Connor:** Oooh, that'll be exciting!

[00:49:50] **Katie Axelson:** So one of the questions we love here on the show is, we are always learning and we love hearing what people have learned recently.

[00:49:56] **Katie Axelson:** So what is something you've learned recently? And then I'll share something I've learned recently.

[00:50:00] **Anna O'Connor:** You know, I've listened to this podcast and I still didn't prepare anything.

[00:50:05] **Katie Axelson:** I didn't say this at the beginning. Hold on, we need to pause because I meant to say this when I was introducing you. Um, Anna was part of the Have Hope, Will Travel ministry team way back in the beginning.

[00:50:14] **Katie Axelson:** Um, so the way that our show notes are written, the consistent structure that our show notes have every single time, that was Anna's work. Um, Anna has forever left a positive impact on Have Hope, Will Travel and I am incredibly grateful for her service to the show. Carry on.

[00:50:29] **Anna O'Connor:** Thanks, Katie, and if for some reason anyone hates the show notes, I'm sorry.

[00:50:36] **Anna O'Connor:** You have my Instagram DM to tell me how to make it better.

[00:50:40] **Katie Axelson:** Please don't. Please be nice to Anna. Do you want me to share what I learned first?

[00:50:49] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah, you go first

[00:50:50] **Katie Axelson:** So I, um, I'm reading a book right now called, um, Tell Her Story, and I meant to look up who the author was before the show. The book of Romans, which was written by Paul to the people in the church in Rome. Paul didn't know the church in Rome. Um, and that letter was delivered from wherever Paul was. Was he in Corinth? I don't remember where Paul was. Um, delivered to Rome by a woman named Phoebe. Um, we know that from, um, Romans 16.

[00:51:16] **Katie Axelson:** But this wasn't just like a USPS, like drop it in the mailbox kind of thing, um, to be the letter deliverer, this is what I've just learned, would be like to read the letter out loud, which is also like a vocal performance of the letter, so it's likely she was coached by Paul on how to deliver this letter, um, and then any like, Follow up questions or the discussion continuation or any clarifications she would have led.

[00:51:42] **Katie Axelson:** And so Paul charged her to deliver this letter and like physically deliver it and verbally and orally deliver it and continue the conversation with his congregation. He did not know and is his longest letter, um, that we've got recorded, which means the first person to interpret the book of Romans. Was a woman and she was individually hand picked and hand selected by a man who's always quoted as saying I don't allow women to teach Well, huh?

[00:52:11] **Katie Axelson:** Let's look at context on those passages because look at what he also did.

[00:52:16] **Anna O'Connor:** That is a fantast thing you've learned recently.

[00:52:19] **Katie Axelson:** Right? My world has been forever changed by Phoebe

[00:52:23] **Anna O'Connor:** Yes, and how those things get hidden, but yeah, they can really they really matter

[00:52:28] **Katie Axelson:** the important knowing context, right?

[00:52:32] **Anna O'Connor:** Okay, the thing that I've learned recently from my Theology and Ethics class is that the idea of the Trinity for so long was focused on just proving that God the Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit are equals.

[00:52:53] **Anna O'Connor:** Along the way, what the article that I was reading said, the idea that the Trinity represents relationship with us human beings kind of got lost along the way, because it was important in the early church to decide that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three in one, the Trinity. That was important stuff to figure out.

[00:53:18] **Anna O'Connor:** But as in recent years, the idea more so of the Trinity representing relationship and the Son really understanding truly the human experience and the Spirit facilitating sanctification in order to become more like God, that whole idea is super, super central to the idea of the Trinity. And I don't know why that struck me so powerfully this week as I was doing my homework, but it did because as I thought of my, don't think, as I have thought about the things I've learned about the Trinity, it's always been in relation to one another and not looking down on earth and being participatory with God's creation, which is what Christian faith is about.

[00:54:20] **Katie Axelson:** So it is who he is, but you're right. It's an element that we forget. Wow. That's awesome. Thank you for sharing that. Anna, would you be willing to pray for us?

[00:54:29] **Anna O'Connor:** I would love to.

[00:54:33] **Anna O'Connor:** Holy God, we thank you for today, this day, and all the days that these listeners will be listening to this podcast and we just bring them before you and say God, would you just be with them? Would you be so near to them and and would they know your love and would the calls on their life be just fanned by the people around them and by you as they continue to take steps in however you feel like, however they feel like you're leading them.

[00:55:14] **Anna O'Connor:** God, we love you and we thank you in Jesus name. Amen.

[00:55:21] **Katie Axelson:** Anna, thank you so much. Thank you for being willing to, yeah, to share your story and for your perspective. Thank you for. Um, hearing God's call and stepping into ministry and stepping into whatever it is that he is going to continue to do in and through you.

[00:55:36] **Katie Axelson:** Um, and thank you for investing in the lives of the young people that you're investing in right now. I'm sure there are some not young people you're investing in too, so we'll thank you for that as well. Um, but specifically the young people, um, who come in and out of the church building like you're at church right now.

[00:55:50] **Katie Axelson:** Um, and so thank you for that. investing in the lives of them, um, on the church campus, at school, out in public, like as you interact with them. Thank you for showing them what it looks like to be passionately in love with Jesus. Um, and thank you for the work that you've done for Have Hope, Will Travel.

[00:56:05] **Katie Axelson:** Like this podcast would not be what it is without you. Um, and that means a lot to me. And thanks for being my friend, um, for being willing to, to sit on my couch and say, I think I'm wrestling with this. What are, what are your thoughts? Um, and to, to kind of process it together. And now here we get to be two women pastors.

[00:56:25] **Anna O'Connor:** Yeah, well, thank you for being a resource and a friend along the journey. I am really, really thankful for the connections I've made in the discernment process and our conversations were fuel and they, they fanned my flame. So that, uh, that's really special.

[00:56:46] **Katie Axelson:** Thank you.