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Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this special 50th episode of our program, alumna Emily Judd interviews Yale Divinity School Dean Gregory Sterling, on a wide range of topics, including polarization in America, the future of theological education, and the Visionary Living Village project. Dean Sterling recalls the eco theology wisdom he heard from President Jimmy Carter.

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God has appointed you to be a steward of creation, to be responsible for creation and will hold you responsible for the way that you treat this land and everything in it.

[\(00:47\)](#):

He weighs in on how polarization in America is impacting religious communities.

[\(00:52\)](#):

As a Christian, I'm very worried that we're going to end up with all red churches and all blue churches instead of having churches that are purple.

[\(01:00\)](#):

He also discusses the future of theological education.

[\(01:04\)](#):

People haven't lost interest in spirituality or religion. They have lost interest in institutions to a great degree, but not in spirituality.

[\(01:16\)](#):

And Dean Sterling explains the mission behind the Sustainable Living Village Project to

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Create what I call apostles of the environment, people who go out and be champions for sustainability in whatever ways they can.

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Welcome Dean Sterling to the 50th episode of the YDS Quad Cast. Thank you so much for joining us today. I would like to speak to you first and foremost about the Living Village. This historic project that Yale Divinity School broke ground on last year. It is a new net positive energy student housing complex that will produce zero waste using solar power and sustainable water practices. Can you explain the ethos behind the project? How does it reflect the values of YDS?

[\(02:07\)](#):

Sure. Well, thank you and congratulations on 50 episodes. I think that's a real accomplishment. You've done remarkable work, and so I celebrate what you've done and appreciate it. The Living Village is the most sustainable structure known today. That is, it's using that standard, and I want to explain it in this way in terms of the ethos that lies behind it. We believe, at least I believe that universities and divinity schools exist in part to address the major crises that confront us. And the most pressing, or at least one of the most pressing crises in our world today, is the ecological crisis because it will affect every human being on the face of the earth. How do we address that? One way we are trying to address that is by constructing this new residence, which we hope will set a standard and be a challenge for how other colleges and universities build residents halls from now on.

[\(03:17\)](#):

And I expect that it will someday be eclipsed, but it goes back specifically to the conviction that we are stewards of our creation. That is, we're part of creation charged by God to 10 creation. Now, Genesis 1 26 through 28, which you're probably already thinking of, is a famous text and it's been used in multiple ways. One scholar wrote a very famous essay, Lynn White, which was published in Science Magazine all the way back in 67, in which he made the point that Jews and Christians are responsible for the ecological crisis because they think they have dominion over creation and can treat it with the impunity. That's not how I read the text. And Lynn White actually offered a different reading of it himself, but I read the text in this way. I remember attending the American Academy of Religions annual conference in San Diego a good number of years ago, and President Jimmy Carter was a guest, and there are about 4,000 people in this auditorium.

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And he was interviewed and one of the interviewers asked him, he said, president Carter, you've always been proud of your environmental accomplishments, but isn't that intention with your commitments to the biblical text and your pride in teaching the biblical text every Sunday? And President Carter responded in the following way. He said, well, I'm assuming that you're referring to Genesis one. And he said, when I grew up every year, the minister at our little church in Plains, Georgia preached from that text no matter who the minister was, and they all said the same thing. They all said, God has appointed you to be a steward of creation, to be responsible for creation and will hold you responsible for the way that you treat this land and everything in it. Your lies depend on it. Your children's lies, your grandchildren's, and you are answerable to God. So from my perspective, this is not simply a technological or scientific issue.

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It is an ethical issue, a moral issue. And I think sometimes people are really surprised by that. I remember Gus Beth, who was the dean of the School of the Environment, made a famous statement in A BBC broadcast in which he said, I used to think that the greatest, and I'm paraphrasing, I may not get this exact, I used to think that the greatest ecological crises we faced were biodiversity loss, the collapse of ecosystems and climate change, but I was wrong. The real challenge is ethical. That is, it's with people who are greedy and people who are apathetic and won't address the problems that we have. So this is our response to that. It's a way to try to lead ethically, morally, and I hope it will go well beyond just the building. It's not just a building. It's far more than that. I

[\(06:48\)](#):

Would like to hear your insights on some of the advances and challenges related to theological education. The first thing is the challenge of decreasing enrollment at seminaries across the United States. During your time as Dean, YDS reached its strategic goal of covering tuition for all students with demonstrated need. Can you talk about why that was so important to YDS to help maintain enrollment?

[\(07:16\)](#):

Sure. So Ken, I want to say one thing about the financial aspect just very briefly, but for me, this is also an ethical issue. So the way that theological education was paid for in the earliest period was by this colony and then the state. And then when Connecticut became a separate state and adopted a constitution, 18, 18, it severed its payments to churches. So created a crisis because all of a sudden clergy had been paid by the state, no longer had a salary. So if things passed to churches and churches have paid for things and churches paid for people to go to school, then it passed to individuals as churches began to decline and their ability to pay. But that created a huge problem with debt levels. So in my view, it's now passed to institutions and we are responsible for helping to cover this, at least those institutions that have the capacity to do it. So I think that's important to say, and it's still something we're going to work on very diligently.

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What are some other strategies that theological institutions can use to help increase enrollment? So

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Here are a couple of things I think that are other options. The first is that it's absolutely imperative that we increase diversity. And I say this for multiple reasons I say it because again, I think it's morally the right thing to do. Secondly, I think it's academically in our interest to do that because we all know that when we have diverse perspectives and have discussions that come from people out of different quarters, it enriches the discussion. It actually advances things in a way that if we have monolithic discussions, we don't make any progress. And the third thing I would say is that I think these churches are of vital importance and they add to the pool of people who can come. It'd be crazy to ignore. For example, the black church in the United States of America. It's a very important church, I should say. Church is, it's not singular.

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It's fairly diverse, but we can't afford to. So that's one point. Secondly, I think we have to diversify our curriculum in ways that reflect where people are at. So I'll give you some examples. One is we have deliberately expanded our MAR concentrations to try. We now have 14 of these to try to offer areas that are of interest to people. People haven't lost interest in spirituality or religion. They have lost interest in institutions to a great degree, but not in spirituality. So trying to address those needs. And I think along that line, I would mention a couple of specific things. This year we're going to finish our review of the Master of Divinity curriculum. That has to be broader. So for example, I'm hoping that we will have an option for people who want to be trained as chaplains to receive a certificate in chaplaincy as they get their Miv degree.

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Because in the United States, there are now companies hiring chaplains, which is unbelievable from my perspective. But it's because people don't have faith communities to lean on when they have a crisis and they need help. So the corporations are hiring chaplains to help. That's one example. I think another way that we can do this, and we're trying this fall, we're launching a new certificate program in youth ministry, and it's designed to train youth ministers because we realize that in New England, there are very few paid youth ministers. They're all volunteers and they need training and they want training. So I think everybody needs to be creative.

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Yeah. I want to pick up on what you just said about diversity, reflecting diversity at YDS. I'm personally thinking about religious diversity, religious demographics across America are changing, and I'm wondering how do you see Divinity schools responding to this trend? Do you think that YDS has an advantage because it's not tied to any particular denomination?

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It's a great question. I would say, first of all, there is a real shift that's taking place demographically, and I follow all these statistics because I have to worry about this from the perspective of the school and some of the ones that I remember just off top of my head, in 1990, 90% of Americans thought they were Christians. And in 2020 it was about 66% or less. So there was a huge falloff. And with that has come a decline in the number of people interested in going into ministry per se. So that has changed. And the decline, it is not just a Christianity's declining in Judaism and Islam are booming. That isn't the case. The decline is across the board. The boom has come from those who identify as spiritual but not religious in the sense of not affiliated with a particular tradition or especially with an institutional form of that tradition.

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I think what that means is that we have to think in very broad ways about how we prepare these people. And that's part of one example for us has been to create an initiative to prepare people to lead not for profits. So that ministry for us has been broadened in its definition to include not-for-profits. We had originally in our first strategic plan when I was dean, formulated as one of our goals that we would form an interfaith area, a major area, and we made some progress. We hired a Muslim ar Malik, and we've offered a course in Judaism very faithfully. But in all candor, we haven't made as much progress as we wanted. We have a visiting professor in Judaism coming this fall. I'm very excited about that. So we'll keep working at that.

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Well, I can say from my experience, and I was at YDS from 2016 to 2019, I took two interfaith courses. One of them completely changed my life, which was Christian Muslim Dialogue with the late Dr. Laman Sana, and the other one was called Building Interreligious community. So there were interfaith courses offered. I would like to talk now about the advances in theological education. We discussed the challenges, the decreasing enrollment, the changing demographics, but when it comes to advances, I would like to discuss advances in collaboration. Under your leadership YDS affiliated with Andover Newton Theological School, how do you feel or how do you see the role of partnership in theological education today?

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I think one of the things that's happened is theological education landscape is changing, is that independent seminaries have found it more and more difficult to exist. So what one of the patterns is happening is schools that have ties to a particular denomination are now affiliating with the university associated with that denomination, or they're partnering with another entity within their own tradition. So partnerships will go on, and I think that there'll be a movement towards conglomerating around university-based programs because there's more security there than there is independently.

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Now, you've touched on a bit the future or what to expect about theological education. And I'm wondering, do you have any other thoughts to share or predictions about the future of theological education? Sure.

(16:34):

I have to think about this. I say that we're in the nap of theological education. Now, that's a Mesoamerican word actually. The Aztecs used it. It literally means something like in betweenness, which is a terrible English expression, but it essentially means we know where we've been, but we're really not at all sure where we're going. So we're experimenting right now. So I would say that if I think about the future of theological education, I've just talked about this process of consolidation, I think that's going to go on. But I think another thing that will happen is just a lot of experimentation. And I think that's important because we need to find ways to relate to people and to the younger generations of our world. And one of the challenges we face is that they don't trust institutions. And I understand why I don't think institutions have always been credible, but that's a real challenge.

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I think that in theological education, there will be more attempts to educate outside divinity schools or seminaries in non-formal settings. And that may be good. My concern is that when you're facing a crisis, I think the last thing you should do is send out people who are not well prepared. I think what we need to do is prepare people thoroughly so that they're very capable of handling these. And the other thing I'll say that will change is the picture globally in 2010, something like 23.6% of the world's Christians lived in Sub-Saharan Africa. And it's estimated that by 2060, that will be as high as 40%. Four out of every 10 Christians will live in Sub-Saharan Africa. Other places have expanded the East China, Asia and South America still have very strong Christian. South America still has a strong Christian population, and it's expanded in Asia. But that means we have to welcome more people from those areas, but they're not going to think the way we do. And that will be a challenge for us and for them, and we have to be open to learning from them and to invite them to be open to learning from us. But it needs to be a dialogue in a two-way street.

(19:28):

So I have to ask you ahead of the upcoming presidential election, I have to ask about polarization, especially what researchers refer to as a effective polarization, which is growing in the United States. How can religious communities and religious leaders in America break down this polarization? Is there anything that YDS as a community can do to help?

(19:54):

We're trying. So polarization is such a concern to me that I made it the focus of my comments at commencement this last year. And researchers have pointed out that we've gone through three phases. So one was the ideological phase where we thought polarization was all about our own ideologies, but in reality, that's not quite true because on a lot of issues, Americans agree, at least the majority agree, but we still seem to be polarized. Maybe our leaders have more polarization than the populace does. So effective polarization has taken center stage, and you hear it in language like instead of saying my political opponent, we now talk about my political enemy, which I think is terrible personally. And it's we they, and now the third stage is the fear that we are forming two groups where we have one group who will talk about pluralism and civility and another group that will say, forget pluralism and civility, their roadblocks to progress.

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We just want progress. And you can see some of that in our world today. So this is heightened in the US because of the presidential election this year. And there is a stronger sense of polarization than I've ever felt in my lifetime, stronger than it in any other time. So what can we do? Well, I want to suggest three things. This is the way that I think, one, we need to make sure that people interact personally with people

who are different. You might think, well, why say that? There's a book that has influenced my thinking called *American Grace* by Robert Putnam and David Campbell. But they talked, they looked at their sociologist and political theorist and they were looking at why is it that in America we have as much religious pluralism as we do and still get along and we can and have. But their answer is it's because we live in the same neighborhoods.

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We actually rubbed shoulders with other people. So we have, I'm a Christian, I have good Jewish friends, I have good Muslim friends, and I know them as human beings. They're not just somebody else out there. They are my friends. And that changes the way that I view them. So one of the things we need to do is to make sure that people engage with each other as friends. That can be in a social project for a local community. It can be in a number of different ways, but I think that's a fundamental importance that we know each other as human beings. Secondly, I would say that I think we need to foster conversations, but these are really tricky. And so one of the things we did this last year at the Divinity School was to have small group discussions, and we had guidelines for those and tried to set these up in a way that allowed people to be candid, but also to be protected so that they knew that what they said would be heard and it would be said in a safe space.

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We also tried to have some closed sessions with faculty talking about their views. So you can have influential figures and thought leaders in communities have discussions, but you want to set those up carefully or they could quickly devolve into shouting matches and you would produce the opposite result that you were trying to create. So how those are set up is a vital importance. And the third thing I would say is I still believe in a bully pulpit. That is, I think we need to preach unity. I think we need to emphasize that we are all part of one humanity, and we need to respect the fact that we won't see everything eye to eye. As a Christian, I'm very worried that we're going to end up with all red churches and all blue churches instead of having churches that are purple. And I have my own political views. I'm not shy about that, but I think not everyone's going to see things the same way I do, and I have to understand that. And I hope that we can create communities of faith where differences are recognized and allowed within those communities, and they can be models for the larger community.

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I want to ask you one final question. You first began serving as Dean of Yale de Nu School in 2012. Can you share one of the personal highlights from your experiences serving as Dean of YDS for over a decade?

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Well, it'd be hard to say 1, 2, 3.

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Okay, I'm going to just say this. These are the three things that give me the greatest satisfaction. Our diversity. We've tripled the number of faculty from underrepresented groups, doubled the number of students, doubled the number of staff, changed the curriculum, changed the culture is just a different culture. It's not what it once was. And I think that's of vital importance. I will say we worked very hard to get to our goal of helping students with providing full tuition and a little beyond for everyone with demonstrated need. We raised more than \$60 million to do that. That was a lot of work, and most of that didn't come in big hunks. It came in small amounts. I can see the help it provides to students, and that's

immensely rewarding to me because they're very talented and we want them to go out and pursue their calling and their mission. And the third thing I will say is the living village.

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I've devoted a big part of my life to this project since 2015, and I'm so grateful that I now can see a structure ascending even now with the third floor beginning to emerge just across from where I'm sitting. And I know that this is not just a building. I asked the two lead people for the construction management company, what would you say is different about this building? And they were quiet for a minute. And finally one of 'em said, well, normally you build a building for a specific function. You build an apartment complex, you build an office building, and you know what it's for? This is a residence, but this is not just a residence. This is completely different. This is trying to change the game about how we think about building. And I think it will change the way that people who live in this think about how they live, and that's what it is.

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And so we want to emphasize that and to create what I call apostles of the environment, people who go out and be champions for sustainability in whatever ways they can. Both the people who live in it and the people who simply are here and see it, but will experience it in their own ways. So those are the things that give me the greatest internal reward in I feel to be very fortunate to have been here and to have been part of a group who've done these things, not just been me. It's been a whole group of people who've worked hard to do this

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Well. I cannot wait to see the Living Village finally completed in person. And I think no other university in the world that I know of has done something as ambitious and innovative as this. So thank you so much, Dean Sterling, for speaking with us today about the Living Village and so many other issues and what the future of YDS holds. So thank you so much.

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Thank you. And thank you for 50 podcasts that you've put together and all the people you've touched through these conversations that you've held.