Leeann and Ben

**SPEAKERS**

Leeann Culbreath, Allison Duvall, Ben, Kendall Martin

**Allison Duvall** 00:10

Why do you support refugees?

00:12

I support refugees because my family were refugees.

00:15

I support refugees because we are all God's children and we all deserve a safe place to grow in God's love.

00:21

I support refugees because God made us all in God's image.

00:25

I support refugees because I'm a legal guardian of a minor asylum named Carol from Burundi.

00:32

I support refugees because my Lord was a refugee.

00:36

Because I welcome and I love my neighbor.

**Allison Duvall** 00:40

Hi, and welcome to Hometown, a podcast from Episcopal Migration Ministries, the refugee and immigration ministry of the Episcopal Church. I'm Allison Duvall.

**Kendall Martin** 00:50

And I'm Kendall Martin. Today's episode features an interview with Ben, a pastor, evangelist, and asylee from Nigeria. He lives in the southeast United States and was granted asylum in 2020.

**Allison Duvall** 01:01

We also speak with the Reverend Leeann Culbreath, who has accompanied individuals and families impacted by immigrant detention in South Georgia, most often at the Irwin County Detention Center in Ccilla, Georgia. In 2017, she helped found South Georgia Immigrant Support Network, which they referenced in today's interview. South Georgia Immigrant Support Network is a humanitarian nonprofit that provides a hospitality house, visitation, pen pal, post-release, and advocacy programs. Leeann frequently travels around the Diocese of Georgia teaching and preaching about immigrant detention and accompaniment ministry. And in 2020, she became one of our volunteer co facilitators for EMM's detention ministry network. Kendall, what did you think? And listeners we just finished the conversation with Leeann and Ben, what did you think Kendall?

**Kendall Martin** 01:49

I'm really just so excited for folks to get to hear the interview, it was really powerful. And I feel really grateful for Ben for sharing his story and learning about his relationship with Leeann and how important it is for people to understand that, you know, you can do something, you can do anything. Whether it's writing a letter, or it's actually going and visiting someone who's in detention, or calling your member of Congress, there's so many things that you can do, you just need to do something. And I I hope that that's what people take away from today's episode. What about you?

**Allison Duvall** 02:26

Oh, gosh, everything you said and, and so much more. It was. I think you'll feel this listeners when you listen, there's extreme highs in the conversation like are the moments that gave me an emotional boost, and moments that left me just despairing, and then return me to moments of hope again. So it's, it's really quite the quite the important conversation. We really hope and you'll hear me challenge you listeners to do this, we really hope that you will share this episode with at least three other people and challenge them to share it with three more, though the work that Leeann and Ben and so many others are about is about abolishing the inhumane and horrific detention system in this country. And we need your help to make that a reality to to bring liberation, a healing, justice and reconciliation about. So we really hope that you're moved by the conversation and we do challenge you please share this episode.

**Kendall Martin** 03:29

And I invite you to check out the blog post associated with this episode for even more information about the system of immigration detention, about networks that you can get involved in ways that you can advocate in support of immigrants. So we hope you enjoy today's conversation.

**Allison Duvall** 03:52

Listeners, we're so grateful to be here today with our good friend, Leeann Culbreath, who is a priest in the Diocese of Georgia. And our friend Ben whom, listeners if you accessed our Stations of the Cross that we released in 2020. Ben was the author of the reflection for the First Station of the Cross. So Ben, we've known of you and of your ministry and of your story, really through Leeann and we're so grateful for your time this morning chatting with us. Thanks for being here. So to move into our first question, we'd love to hear a little bit about both of your lives and your ministries. Ben, we know that you're a pastor, and that that part of your identity has been very important in these last few years. And Leeann we know that you're a priest, so if both of you could share a little bit about your life and ministry and also how you got to know one another, that would be wonderful.

**Ben** 04:43

Um, so I'm Pastor Ben. I'm originally from Nigeria, so I came to the United States to seek asylum. So when I got to the airport, I was taken from the airport into detention. You know, I was surprised because it's it was something that took me by surprise which I was not expecting, coming to the greatest nation in the world, taken into detention and they practically took me to jail, where they keep criminals. So while they call it detention, this is where they keep immigrants. So while I got in there, I don't know nobody I don't know where to start from, you know. But I had only one thing, which is my faith in God, you know, so I held on to my faith and God, prayed encouraged other people, you know, God always has a way of doing things and using his people. Once you always say yes to God, he always knows how to direct our paths. So, me being in that detention was also God's way of showing me and showing everybody around me that he always comes through no matter the situation that he can turn a very bad situation into a good thing. So I was in detention there, instead of me being soaked into my own problems and soaked into worries. Instead, God used me to be the chaplain for the detention center. First I was detained at ACDC, Atlanta City Detention Center. Then I was taken to Irwin County Detention Center. So at Irwin County Detention Center, Ocilla, in Georgia, that is where I was detained for most part of the years. My total time in detention that I was detained for was five years in two months. So being in that detention, I continue to do the will of God, preach to people every day, encourage people, there's a lot of broken people and a lot of people separated from their families, you know, so after my two years and half being detained. So I was already the chaplain there, I was the person preaching for them. So Leeann already on her own has a ministry where she visits detainees. So one day she visited another detainee and asked him Who's your chaplain here? So the detainees mentioned to Leeann, Oh, it's pastor Ben. So Leeann is like, okay, I want to meet this pastor Ben, you know, I'm interested to meet him. So, then one day, one Saturday, the officers called me I'm like, Ben, you have you have a visitor who comes to visit you. I'm like, Well, I don't know nobody, who's coming to visit me. And I'm like, God, did you send an angel for me okay, let's go and see who's coming to visit me. So I went out there I saw Leeann was taken out back and she gives me a warm smile and a friendly smile. And with that means that I you know, to give me assurance, and be like, don't worry, I'm your friend. So I sat down, and she told me about herself. And you know, so that is how our friendship started. And that is how I met her. So

**Leeann Culbreath** 08:16

We were talking about kind of how our life has been informed by our faith. And I think it's been a lifelong journey for me of building community and, and friendships, beyond my family system. My family was not really a church growing family and I went, we went for a little while while I was a little girl. And I just felt very close to God and wanted to stay involved in the church. And this is like, third or fourth grade. So from that point on, I just went by myself, when my family stopped going, and my brothers always accused me, they teased me this was like a bad thing that I was always trying to feed the neighborhood, I was always inviting friends to dinner, to come to the table to be with us. And you know, the time that was an insult, but I we laugh at it now that, you know, since I was very young, I've always been trying to bring people in and feed people. That's been a big part of my faith. And then as I went through college and graduate school, and then after graduate school, got involved in peace and justice movements and went on a human rights delegation to Colombia, in the middle of their Civil War. And my experiences there of seeing people who were under threat of a war of who were displaced by war, who were being disappeared, who had lost loved ones, because of that civil unrest that went for decades. And being in the middle of that opened my eyes to the realities around the world of suffering, of evil and of the call of the Church to accompany and be in solidarity with those who are suffering. And it also opened my eyes to our, to my own complicity in that because as a taxpayer my dollars were going to support that war in Colombia. And so I did a lot of presentations after we returned from that trip, to try and educate folks. And to also reckon with myself about my own complicity in evils that I don't even know about. And that I'm not personally connected to, but I am connected to in some way. And so there was a there's a long story that I actually shared in an EMM podcast last year about how I heard a call to do immigrant detention ministry. So I won't get into it here. But maybe we can put a link to it. It's a fun story. But it was an unexpected ministry that fell into my lap that the Holy Spirit just gave me when I was serving as a deacon at the time and was in a transition in my ministry. So I ended up hearing about a detention center close to my home 30 minutes away from Tifton, Georgia, where I've lived for about 15 years now, had never heard of it before, no idea that there was one: a prison there, and two: that immigrants were being detained there. So by communicating with others in the advocacy community in Georgia, I learned more about the facility and was able to start visiting people to find out what was happening and who was there. And what were the needs for people in there. Did they need communion? Did they want chaplaincy? Were there other needs for their families? How could the church respond to this? And how could this become a part of my own ministry and growth. And ultimately, transformation, this is what it became as I built friendships with people who were detained. And you know, Ben and I met through plexiglass with the plastic clunky phones, you know, not able to touch in a room that was just loud and difficult to hear each other, to communicate. But with him and with others I visited in detention, there's just an instant human connection. And love really breaks through all of the barriers that were put up between us. The fact that Ben and I ever met is a miracle. And then all that there's, there's only one way to explain it. And that's God, that the Holy Spirit drew us together in friendship. And that happens over and over again, in detention centers, in prisons, around the country, that people who were strangers to each other, become friends and humanity breaks through all of those barriers, and love breaks through all of those barriers. So I was privileged to get to be part of that, in developing this friendship with Ben, who then became a prayer partner was always praying for me, for my family, always called on the holidays, my family, my mom didn't even call me some holidays. But Ben always call me on a holiday to make sure he knew I was thinking about him. And so he was part of our family and our life, long before he was ever released. And through that friendship with him, and not just with me, but others that came into his life. You know, through visitation, we found legal support that he didn't have, were able to connect him with the resources he needed to endure detention longer to fight his case. But then also eventually, you know, win a Habeas petition and be released, and then eventually, he had already found an attorney, for his case, a pro bono attorney through Catholic Charities, who fought for his asylum case and eventually won. So it's been a long journey. And through that our diocese got involved. My bishop, went with me to visit Ben several times. You know, and then after his release, different families in the diocese and our Cursillo ministry in the diocese have really embraced Ben and he has been such a blessing on all of us. Because of his faith and his testimony of God's faithfulness in his life, it's just been an incredible journey to be on together.

**Kendall Martin** 14:46

And for our listeners who might not know how it works in terms of visitation when you were first going to Irwin Detention Center, was it through a formal visitation program or how exactly does that work?

**Leeann Culbreath** 15:00

Right at the time, there was no visitation program or any humanitarian group serving the population at Irwin County Detention Center. There had long been a visitation program at Stewart Detention Center about two hours away from me, called El Refugio. And through them I learned about Irwin County Detention Center and also started to work with them on building a program. And so from those early visitations, like with Ben and some others, started to get more people involved in visitation locally at Irwin, gradually, a nonprofit developed: the South Georgia Immigrant Support Network, which a small group of us founded together and I continue to co-lead that group to provide humanitarian support and mutual aid for people who are detained. And for their families. We opened a hospitality house for a couple of years for families and for pro bono attorneys and translators and social workers who came to support the women and men detained at Irwin. So there wasn't anything there. But gradually it developed and partly because people do get transferred around to different detention centers. So you know, Ben was ultimately in three different detention centers in Georgia over the course of the five years he was detained. So when people were transferred from Stewart to Irwin, El Refugio was able to give us names and ID numbers of people who had already been in a visitation program. And then from there, once you meet with one person, and you say, well, who else needs a visit who's struggling? Who needs support? Who doesn't have family to come see them? You know, so Ben would give me a list of names and A numbers of people who wanted visits, and other people did the same. And through that, we were able to start to build friendships. And this just web of support that now goes all around the world. I'm in contact regularly with people in Africa and Mexico and the Caribbean. They're still part of my life.

**Kendall Martin** 17:13

And Ben, how did your relationships expand with other folks in the Diocese of Georgia? I know Leanne said other people started to get involved and come visit.

**Ben** 17:23

Yes. Um, so after we met for the first time, you know, so just the hand of God. So Leeann was able to introduce me to another pastor of the Baptist Church called Rick, you know, he came also to visit me and we became friends also. So even the Bishop Benhase, he came also to visit me, which I really appreciate because you know people see people who are in detention as nobody, you know, but having a visit from the Bishop of the Diocese of Georgia, that is, you know what more can you ask from God, you know, he came to visit me, give me his blessings. And you know, it was, it was, it was such a great day for me like I was this one of the happiest days of my life, you know, so it was like the story of Joseph, you know, God taking a nobody and making him somebody, you know, so when I got released, I met a lot of Episcopalians, attended last year at Crusillio. You know, which was a wonderful experience, I shared my testimony, met a lot of friends and I met Lawson and his family was different today. His parents also who are great, you know, good people of faith. So, I'm still friends all of them. We encourage each other, pray for each other, visit each other. Yes, the world has been wonderful. I encourage more people from the Diocese and all over the states to you know, step out there and show love because our faith is a faith of love. You know, step out there, there's somebody God is calling you to meet somebody God is calling you to make a difference in their life. It can start from a visit, just like it started with me and Leeann. It can start from saying hello to somebody. It can start from you know, just the one smile to somebody.

**Leeann Culbreath** 19:28

Just a letter or postcard. It's so simple.

**Allison Duvall** 19:31

I think it's so true what both of you said about, like our faith is a faith of love. Pastor Ben, you said that. And there's something so powerful about when other people when other when other, beloved children of God remind each other that they matter, and that they're loved and they're seen. So our podcast is called Hometown and one of the things that we've done since we started the podcast is talk to our guests about what "home" means to them. So I I'd love to hear from both of you, not only what he means to you now, but perhaps how that meaning has changed over time, and perhaps if it if your friendship and your ministries have, have influenced how you understand home, so Pastor Ben, would you would you speak to that? What does home mean?

**Ben** 20:24

So growing up, I've always been in ministry too, because my mom and dad, also, my dad was an evangelist was a pastor too. So growing up, I've always wanted to do the will of God, I went on missions, and it was, through going through these missions and doing the work of God that I had some problems, you know, which, which some people don't like me practicing my faith, and doing the work of God doing missions. So so I was in danger where I was from so I had to leave, to come here and seek refuge in, in like my life was, which led to some murder of my some of my family members. So, being a missionary and being the work of God, and preaching and bringing faith and love to people, like, everywhere I've come to has always been home for me in life, because there is there's a, there's this, there's a special blessing, were you able to express love to somebody, you don't want to care again, what whatever is going on, you just want to keep showing the other person that God loves them. That they love of God is transpiring through you to them, you know, so it's, he has always been home. You know, for me for wherever that I've been like, when I was in detention, it was detention felt like home for me. You know, that was why I was able to like, I was preaching sometimes when when we have church service in the detention. We have like over 100 people coming to the church service we have a lot of people like it was by looking at those numbers. It was it was just home for me. And I've seen somebody asked me before when I was in detention, is like: you've been here a long time. You've been here for like five years. Why are you not angry? Why are you not sad? Why are you so happy? Why are you so relaxed? And my answer was simple. I have Jesus you know, so. Being released now. It's Atlanta has been home for me to like because I've been able also to also volunteer be continued to do my ministry is like I discussed with Leeann the other day. My next plan is to start a prison ministry. You know, like I want to be able to go back into prisons into detention centers, like go inside and interact with them. I don't want to you know, be like, you know, be from afar. I want to go inside again and interact with them. You know, be able to see bring the love of Jesus Christ. Bring the love of God.

**Allison Duvall** 23:30

And Leeann, what about you? What is what does home mean now? How has it changed over the last these last few years?

**Leeann Culbreath** 23:37

You know, for me home is wherever people are gathered around a table and eating food, eating homemade food. Really. As I thought about it what is what is home to me that's the images that come are all full tables. And and some and I have different homes like geographically different places I would call home. But the thing that makes it the home is the gathering and the sharing of food. Our family always showed love through food and that's my husband's family's the same that's how I knew they were my people. Because we were all always feeding each other. But it was about so much more than the food it's about being together. And so now, you know, through this ministry that the table is larger, the food is different. And there's love that's flowing in from all over the world in a in a beautiful way. Last Christmas we got to share with Pastor Ben was able to come down to Tifton and be in our home for Christmas Day and and be with other friends through that whole weekend. My favorite memory is is him in our kitchen making jollof--jollof rice right?

**Ben** 24:55

Yes.

**Leeann Culbreath** 24:58

Traditional celebration, celebratory food and not just Nigeria, but throughout Africa, right?

**Ben** 25:07

Yes.

**Leeann Culbreath** 25:10

You know, and while I was doing the gingerbread cookies, which is sort of my, my tradition over over here, and I have a very small kitchen, so it was a little complicated to do all this at once. But just to make that food and then share it around the table with friends, you know, with another group of friends was, was very special. And so I think it's just that the idea, the experience of it just gets richer and more grand and a grander vision of God's table and what's really happening when we when we gather around the altar, around God's table to share in the food that God gives us, and in the drink that God gives us. So it brings us closer to closer to that, because it really is, the ultimate vision of the kingdom is that we're all gathered around the table.

**Kendall Martin** 26:03

I love that that's beautiful. Um, I'd like for listeners who are interested in either getting engaged in some type of ministry, whether formal or informal. I'd love to hear from both of you. Pastor Ben, what do you find to be helpful? As someone who was in immigration detention, like what you needed, what, what would be really helpful? And then from Leeann, from your perspective, like what advice you could give folks when it comes to advocating for those who are in detention and all the work that needs to be done to dismantle that system? I'd love to hear from both of you.

**Ben** 26:45

Yeah, that's a good question. You know, Leeann, the first time we met, she asked me a question also. What do we need? So, and my first answer was bibles. We always needing bibles. Because especially like we I was detained, he was a lot of Hispanics. And there was very little supply of bibles in Spanish. And there was a lot of Hispanics coming in. And they needed, they needed some encouragement, which God provides, and there wasn't enough bibles to share to them to give to them, you know, and always encourage them that when they are leaving to take the bible with them, you know, so once they received the bible, they leaving, they take it with them. So the first thing is the bible. You know, this, there's always need for bible in the detention center. And then the second thing is, yes, in many languages, yes. Not only Spanish, English, and French, you know, because there's a lot of different nationalities in the detention centers. So another thing is a letter, a postcard. Maybe visits if you can, you know, there's a lot of ways you can get involved in, like, there's all already a ministry, this South Georgia Immigration Support Network, which I'm also a member of, so you can reach out to us we already we already know how to, you know, visit people in detention reach people out in detention, support them in different ways. So there is a lot of things we're doing. South Georgia Immigration Support Network, like we provide commissary. Commissary is like extra food detainees gets, they're able to buy. So donation to such you know, SGIN it's also encouraged, you know, sending a postcard we send postcards, then we have people who goes into the detention to visit. So we have different things we do also, we also send books, like some people, they want to read books. We send bibles also, you know, so there's, so if you trying to get involved with detainees with immigrants, formally or informally, that's, there's always a way you just have to ask, you know, so there's always a way. Just don't be afraid and be like, Oh, how do I start? Where do I start from? No, there are people who's doing it already. You know, so there is there is a way already. So just reach out and you'll be involved and you will, is a wonderful experience is an experience you would you would not regret. And the most important part is know that you're practicing your faith. You know, because I always like to share with people in the book of Matthew chapter 25, verse 25, that was Jesus said, "When I was hungry, you gave me food. When I was thirsty, gave me a drink. When I was imprisoned, you visited me." So this is part of our faith. This is a core foundation of our faith. You know? So this is on the Judgment Day, the that is what Jesus will ask us, He will not ask us how many jobs do do we have? How much money? How rich how much was? Instead he will ask, what is the actions? What did we do for our faith? What did we do for his love?

**Leeann Culbreath** 30:24

Yeah, everything he said. But just generally, anything we can do to humanize, personalize people who are in detention, to move away from stereotypes about who is detained, who immigrants are, why they are here. Hearing Ben's story, you know, as an asylum seeker. That's a very different kind of story than somebody who has recently crossed the border, for maybe for work or to meet with family. And there are so many different stories and journeys, of people in immigrant detention. And those who are in detention are not in there because they're criminals, they have not committed a crime for which they're serving a sentence in immigrant detention. Detention is completely unnecessary. There are other ways to track people through a detention process. But because it's profitable, it continues. And so people inside become just numbers and heads to count. So that facilities can, you know, can count all of those people and get paid for them every night and make a profit off of their suffering inside. So the more that we can build relationships and have a human face and say, Here's somebody's story, he came fleeing a threat on his life, or on her life, or, or this person has been here came as a child at two years old, and has no memories of the country of origin. And, you know, and has been here for decades, and does not have a pathway to citizenship except maybe marriage and that pushes women into abusive marriages. So where their spouse will not apply and fill out the paperwork because they want to control that person. So it's a longer story. But just there's we have so many assumptions about who is in immigrant detention and why. And without really hearing the story, without finding out, you know, who they are and who God has created them to be in that they're all beloved children of God and made in the image of God. And they're imprisoned. So the more that we can put a human face on through relationships through letter writing, and visitation and sharing stories, amplifying stories of people who are in detention in any ways that we can. And EMM has done a lot of that work over the last few years. Making sure that stories are getting out there, that we're not that we're not sharing narratives or stereotypes that deny people's humanity, in their expression of God in the world. So there are so many practical things that can do that. And that could be part of that relationship. You know, respect people's dignity, to try to make detention if they have to be in there as endurable as possible. And also to help encourage their own hope and resiliency. People in detention are strong, they have tremendous resilience, they know how to organize and fight for themselves, just sometimes they get tired and need a little encouragement or maybe need a little assist from the outside to do what they know needs to be done for themselves to fight for themselves. So a lot of it is also just helping to encourage the the hope and resilience that's are already there, in their spirits. You know, not coming in with the approach that we're going to, you know, save people, but that together through mutually transformative relationships, we can start to chip away at the system and expose it, shine a light on and expose it for what it is and for what's happening inside. And a lot of that has been happening lately, especially because of medical abuses that have come to light at Irwin County Detention Center. That this particular facility where Pastor Ben was detained for five years is now on national and international news because of what women faced there with gynecological procedures. That happened without consent. Often and, you know, other allegations around the kind of care they received. But that also medical abuse and neglect is something that that men experienced as well, that certainly was part of Ben's experience in detention, with lack of care for chronic illness, that could have become very serious if he had remained in detention much longer. So also advocacy work, advocating, with attorneys, with human rights groups and immigrant rights groups, signing petitions, all of that, getting Congress involved. Those are all critical ministries that we have to help stop the abuse and then eventually, to find justice and healing for those who have who have suffered. People in detention suffer, are put in solitary confinement. I know somebody who experienced they call it lockdown or segregation, but it's solitary confinement for 23 hours a day alone in a cell with no TV, no interaction, no ability to call family. I know one person who experienced 330 day lockdowns in the last year, that's a form of torture.

**Ben** 36:26

It is. It is.

**Leeann Culbreath** 36:28

I could not visit that person, I could not call that person during those 30 days. Scripture, prayer, reading got her through. But that's still torture that will need to be, that she will need to heal from and she will face you know, repercussions for the rest of her life. So advocacy work, is critical to expose and shut down and then eventually find healing to have a Truth and Reconciliation Commission around immigrant detention, I think is essential. I think that needs to happen very soon. And I'm hoping that because the women that because of whistleblower spoke out, because women are coming forward now to share their stories that they could not share before because they just didn't have the protection or the support. To do that. That now we have an opportunity to expose how truly horrible the system is. And we have the attention of people who can make that change. But we just need everybody joining in to say this is wrong. And we just we have to find another way. There is another way and we have to find it. We have to pursue it.

**Ben** 37:50

Yes, let me add a little bit more from what Leeann has said so from my experience in detention Let me remind our listeners again like I was physically detained in a in a detention center in Irwin County Detention Center for five years and two months so that five years and two months like I there was a lot a lot of experiences. So I would tell that the detention center is now privately owned, so is like a business venture for these owners so all they have to do is to maximize their profit. They just be making profit out of this detention centers. So there's a bunch of people not only mean like in the hundred thousands of people who did not commit any crime, but because these detention centers are privately owned, they just want these people to be detained so that they can make profit from taxpayers. So they can make their own profit which i think it's it's is a very barbaric system. And not a lot of people knows that this is what is going on. You know, they say the detainee detainment is more than 100,000, 200,000 detainees who have not committed any crime. I even in the millions of them, but they are being detained because the owners of these detention centers want to make profits. Then another thing they do is the food they provide. It's It's It's not even a dog food is better food than what you feed people in detention centers. And the medical like now everybody has seen the medical piece. It's it's way bad. There is a lot of neglect. There's a lot of people there's even deaths in detention centers. You know, all the owners of these detention center what they are focused on is just their own selfish profit, selfish gains. So I think these detention centers should be closed down and another way devised to handle immigration and set up detaining detainees, which large population of them have not committed crimes. Because I was only in detention because I asked for asylum. My life was in danger. I run over here to seek refuge. But instead I was put in detention. And they were willing to keep holding me because they want to keep making profit from taxpayers.

**Leeann Culbreath** 40:32

And we haven't even mentioned COVID. Yet, we haven't mentioned the fact that these facilities are still operating in a pandemic, where social distancing is really not possible in confinement, there is not good ventilation of the air. For most of the time, in this pandemic, in the last six, eight months, there have been no masks available regularly to detained persons. You know, the the whistleblower, Nurse Wooten from Irwin County Detention Center, shared struggles of staff to even obtain appropriate PPE and how many times they were asked to jeopardize their own health and safety, to provide care for detained persons because they weren't provided with the appropriate protective gear, or they were asked to come in to work even though they were symptomatic. And working around other people who were symptomatic. You know, and so, and people are still being transferred in and out of facilities, often without appropriate testing. And so many women we've heard from, in the last six months have said, you know, women are symptomatic in the dorm, we're not getting tested, we're asking for tests, they won't give them to us. They're moving people or taking them out taking their temperature or sending them back to the dorm. So there are so many people who have experienced COVID. And there have been deaths connected to COVID, at detention centers around the country. All of them are preventable. They can all be released and they should be released, especially during a pandemic, because that it not only impacts persons who are detained, but the workers who work there and then go out into the community, into restaurants and churches, and schools and their families are all at risk. And I live in a community with, you know, we're close to this facility. And so my own community and school system and family and churches, church can be impacted by the failure to contain and address this pandemic within the facility, but it's impossible to contain it because of the conditions. They don't have soap they don't have. Often you know they won't refill a soap machine for a week or won't provide cleaning supplies and but even so they're all breathing the same air, you know the vents all go into other dorms and there are no windows for fresh air. If they get outside, maybe they can get outside for a few minutes a day to kind of a large chicken coop, basically. You know, but a lot of people don't even do that. They'll go months without ever seeing getting fresh air or seeing the sun, they just don't want to go outside because it's too hard to come back in. Once they've gone outside, they can't do it. They can't smell that air and get a taste of freedom and then go back in so they just never go outside. But either way, I mean COVID is that a large part of the complaint that was filed about Irwin back in September was around COVID and the lack of testing and appropriate procedures, not following the CDC guidelines for correctional facilities transferring people or deporting people who are positive for COVID and spreading it to other countries and spreading it around the country to other facilities because people get transferred from Irwin to another facility to be prepared for deportation. They may you know have made seven stops you know along the way to pick up different people at different detention centers before they finally end up getting deported. So the the number of the amount of exposure somebody can have that they can't control they don't they don't have a control any control over whether or not they have a mask. It's not something you can buy in the commissary. So if they don't have one, they don't have one, but women were making masks out of their socks. You know just tearing their socks up to make masks to have something. They just don't have a choice. Families. We can't, families can't send them. You can't provide that for people and and when they're transported they're transported in shackles. To medical appointments while being deported, in chains on hands and feet, like they were, you know, all mass murderers and incredible danger to society and this is true of Pastor Ben, and the medical appointments, you're transported chains.

**Ben** 45:19

Sometimes these chains dig into the waist and dig into the feet. It is a horrible experience, you know, that's why we put these detention centers away from the city. Away from where people wouldn't be, there is nobody that will see another human being been shackled. And just be quiet about it that is dehumanizing. And all this is going on. It is it is still going on up to today.

**Allison Duvall** 45:50

Thank you both for shedding light on the truth and reality of what's happening. I I've learned and heard from you both this morning and continue to from others engaged in this work.That like there's there's an amazing strength and courage that comes from, from both of you to see, acknowledge, and to, to describe the horrors and the inhumanity, but then to move toward addressing the injustices. And not just I think one of the things that individuals like myself who live in relative privilege can have a tendency to do is feeling feeling paralyzed when being met with this information and having to grapple with the truth. So I want to move us if, if you are willing, to challenging our listeners, from this conversation they've listened to, to move towards some kind of action that confronts the injustices that you've spoken about. My own challenge to our listeners kind of pulling from what Leeann said earlier about sharing stories that personalize and make real, what we're talking about. I want to challenge our listeners like, you know, we live in a time of self-contained opinion bubbles. And so we know we're probably preaching to the choir, with this podcast. I would challenge our listeners to share this conversation between Ben and Leeann, with at least three other people, and to challenge those three other people to share it with three other people. And people who would not truly find it or be inclined to listen. So really do do share this conversation. It's so critical that these things get out. And Pastor Ben and Mother Leeann, I'd be interested to hear, what would you challenge our listeners to do? What should they do as an action having heard this conversation this morning?

**Ben** 47:46

So I will challenge our listeners to after listening to this for them to know that there is there is an action to be taken. And not only their knowing that there is an action to be taken this should take the action, they should reach out like reach out to somebody and those like we have mentioned before it is it is not an impossible thing. There is nothing to--like there is already a system to battle this injustice. We just need a lot of support. We just need a lot of we need the people the president to get involved, or lawmakers, Congress like everybody to get involved. Because just like the popular saying: an injustice to one person is an injustice to all. So do not feel that Oh, I'm more privileged. I'm living a good life. I'm American citizen. No, we are all human being that is what we have in common. We are all human beings and we have one sun that shines on everybody. But are you a US citizen, you are an immigrant or we have human being in common and we have this sun, which God lovingly shines for everybody. So it is on everybody that listens to this podcast, do something please do something that is any action you do against an injustice is not very little or speaking out. There is nothing that is little we do against injustice, you write in just a letter you reaching out to the SGIN and that is already fighting against this. You signing a petition that is there is a lot everybody can do. And there is something for everybody. So that is what I would say to our listeners.

**Leeann Culbreath** 49:41

I challenge listeners to trust. That seems like a simple thing. But trust is really really hard. And by trust I mean trusting God, trusting that God is already in this that God has gone before us and is already at work is already bringing freedom and reconciliation and healing in the system is already doing the work of dismantling the system. And so, you know, trust that, that God goes before us. And we don't need to be afraid to do it. And just tapping into God's strength and listening to where God is already at work, and then joining God, in that ministry of reconciliation that's already unfolding in our midst. And trust that goodness will follow and blessing will be part of it. It is scary. I was scared going into a jail for the first time, I had never done prison ministry had no sense of calling to it. Had no idea what I was doing. There were definitely times where I left and I didn't know how I would keep going back. It just had to sit with that trust and know that God had brought me there. To be part of this, there are others who had gone before God was already at work, in Pastor Ben in that facility was already at work to bring us together, and so many other relationships that have formed and that's happening everywhere. So just Trust in the Lord with all your might. I always say, remind people that Pastor Ben, always tells me the Lord is your strength, the Lord is your strength, the Lord is your strength. Every time I would be struggling or stressed or not sure what would happen next. And you know, if you just the Lord is your strength, the Lord is your strength. And so I have that on replay in my mind all the time, whenever I'm feeling, feeling anxious or uncertain about what I'm doing. Or if I feel unsafe, or whatever, I just remember the Lord is my strength. I can trust in that strength to be there for me always.

**Ben** 51:57

Yes, that's true. The Lord is always our strength. We just have to trust in Him. It doesn't take a lot to trust God, just trust. And allow him to take you through the process.

**Kendall Martin** 52:12

Thank you. I think that's a beautiful note to end with for our listeners. And I just want to thank you both so much. And I want to tell you, Pastor Ben, I think your impact on people's lives goes far, and I hadn't even met you. But when I heard that you had been granted asylum, I cheered. And I was excited, and you're doing powerful things. And Leeann, I'm so grateful that you're here today, and that you've introduced us to this relationship, and you're fighting the good fight and grateful to know you. So thank you.

**Leeann Culbreath** 52:47

Thank you. It's a blessing to be part of this and be part of EMM's ministry.

**Ben** 52:53

My final words to say to everybody, first of all, have faith in God and you know, God is present in our lives. It's just that most times people don't trust in Him, or we don't see it or I hope after listening to this podcast, we'll listen to God more and follow his lead. Thank you, Kendall, thank you to Allison, thank you to Leeann for being on this podcast and bringing light on justice for people to see. And I pray that everybody, you know, get involved in this justice to close down detention centers, it is doing more harm than good. No matter how they sell it. It is it is because I was detained physically detained for five years, two months for no crime. So it is time everybody stand up for this fight. You know, and do something about it. Take action about it. And I pray that God bless everybody and the Lord is our strength in Jesus name. Amen.

**Allison Duvall** 54:15

Thank you so much for joining us today listeners. We invite you to join us each week during Advent for reflection and prayer. These reflections will also be available on the EMM website blog.

**Kendall Martin** 54:25

We also invite you to join us on December 13, from 7 to 8pm. Eastern for a virtual Advent vigil and it will be available by Zoom webinar and also Facebook Live we invite you to register for the zoom webinar at bit.ly/EMMvigil.

**Allison Duvall** 54:46

As always, you can follow EMM on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram where we are @EMMrefugees.

**Kendall Martin** 54:52

In the season of giving, we invite you to make a gift to support the refugee and immigration ministries of the Episcopal Church through the work of Episcopal Migration Ministries. Visit episcopalmigrationministries.org/give or text Hometown to 91999. We also want to invite you to get your very own EMM swag at bit.ly/weareemm. We have a variety of EMM branded shirts to help you proclaim loudly that you welcome our newest neighbors.

**Allison Duvall** 55:21

Our theme song composer is Abraham Mwinda Ikando. Find his music at abrahammwinda.bandcamp.com.

**Kendall Martin** 55:28

Until next time, peace be with you and all those you consider home.