Hello and welcome to the Faith & Work podcast where we explore our everyday work in God's world. The Faith & Work podcast is produced and hosted by Denver Institute for Faith & Work. I'm Joanna Meyer and I'm joined today by Dustin Moody. How's it going, Dustin?

It's going great, Joanna, thanks.

Awesome. We have a gorgeous view looking west over the Rocky Mountains today. It's one of those glorious Colorado sunshiny days, so we're enjoying-

It's been so dark recently.

Yeah, it's been so dark and gloomy and snowy recently. It's nice to have some sun.

Yeah, we're looking forward to it. And I'm excited about today's conversation. I think I say that before every ... The start of every podcast I say, "I'm excited about who we get to talk to today." But I am thrilled. We're gonna get a chance to hear from Stephanie Summersrs from The Center for Public Justice, but today's conversation is driven by a felt need among our staff here at the Denver Institute. We have been wondering how do you constructively engage cultural and political discussions in this increasingly divisive age. Specifically like how do you engage issues that are important to you, but how do you do it in a way that's winsome and effective? Whether that means speaking up at a City Council meeting, figuring out how to navigate a touchy subject over Thanksgiving dinner, or even expressing your opinions on social media, or potentially choosing not to express your opinions on social media.

Probably a better idea.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Jeff was reminded, Jeff Haanen, our founder said, "Joanna, you have got to stop politicking on Facebook." And I thought he had wise advice with that.

So this topic of faith and public engagement plays out in our personal lives, but it especially affects the professional lives of people who work in roles where they have a public presence, folks that are in law or government, media, communications.
fact, this is the topic of an event that Denver Institute will host on Thursday, March 14th. It's called Faith in the Public Square, and Stephanie will be our CEO at that event. Dustin, why don't you introduce Stephanie for us.


Dustin Moody: 02:11 She's a frequent speaker and moderator, and Stephanie also contributed a chapter to the edited volume "The Church's Social Responsibility" and has written for publications including Comment Magazine and Q Ideas. As Joanna mentioned, Stephanie is joining us as our keynote speaker on March 14th.

Dustin Moody: 02:25 Stephanie, how's it going?

Stephanie Summers: 02:27 Going wonderful, thanks so much for having me today.

Joanna Meyer: 02:29 Stephanie, I'm curious to know a little bit more about your work with The Center for Public Justice for me and the listeners who aren't as familiar with your work. Tell us a little bit about the organization and two or three of the top initiatives you're working on.

Stephanie Summers: 02:44 Sure, I'd be happy to. So the Center for Public Justice is 42 years old, and it started as a conversation among friends. And basically this group of folks was gathered together to try and figure out how as Christians we take seriously Christ's lordship over every area of life and that includes our vocation as citizens and our work in the realm of governments. We believe that Christ has something to say about that and so the work that the Center for Public Justice has done for the last 42 years, whether it's been through diverse set of programming, has all been aimed at that direction as for addressing that particular question.

Stephanie Summers: 03:29 Right now I could talk about our work all day, but for the purposes of getting two or three things, we're pretty focused in many ways on equipping Christian citizens for winsome, faithful, political engagement. What does it mean to be a person who
lives in a political community where we don't necessarily share the views of all of our neighbors? How do we do that well, and how do we do it in places where it's even hard to come to some kind of consensus within the context of our local congregations, much less when it comes to the shape of our communities.

Stephanie Summers: 04:12 We do a lot of work, as well, in equipping the leaders of faith-based organizations to be really excellent in their work. One of the distinctives that we bring is a real focus on being citizenship goals of the organizations, and so really helping these organizations engage public policy well and in a winsome way, as well as allowing their organizational practices and their public engagements successfully with their faith-based initiative we have called Sacred Sector.

Stephanie Summers: 04:48 And then a big piece of work that we've been doing recently has been on scoring the principles and potential policy directions for family supportive policies and practices that spoke with a level of what we do in our own enterprises, whether those are business enterprises or faith-based non-profits, as well as what we do with regards to public policy and how to have the best and most family supportive workplaces that we can.

Stephanie Summers: 05:22 So that's just the top three things we're working on. I'm happy to say more about any of those, and I'm sure particularly with the first, political discipleship work, it'll come out more in our discussion.

Joanna Meyer: 05:32 That is so fascinating. I love how you use that term political discipleship. I'm really curious to know how this became a calling for you in the sense of educating people about use their faith to engage publicly. I would love to know more about your professional journey of how you ended up here.

Stephanie Summers: 05:52 Sure. It's not linear. God does that. I actually became aware of these questions through my undergraduate work in studying women's and gender studies, where I was the only Christian in my program, and had the opportunity to really wrestle with these questions of how do we live in a pluralistic society when we don't all agree? And so these questions were ones that I came at quickly. I went to Kenyon College in Ohio, which is filled with people who are fluent in faith but not necessarily people of faith, who were very welcoming to my worldview in the classroom and very much encouraged me not to be stupid. And so they basically said things like, "If anyone has this opinion, you need to do your work. What does your tradition say about
"And so it actually forced me to go back to many of the religious sources for good engagement in public life, good engagement of difference, winsome conversations about that, and then also some models that were not at all winsome, and examine those and bring that into my academic work.

Stephanie Summers: 07:12

That in turn really prepared me for working in campus ministry. So I ended up journeying to be a campus ministry professional with the Coalition for Christian Outreach, which is a national campus ministry organization based in western Pennsylvania. And in that context, I ended up as an executive working with schools that had to answer questions about how do we do good ministry, and in the student wellness world they call this the wellness wheel, so a sixth of this model is spiritual wellness.

Stephanie Summers: 07:49

So how do we, particularly as a secular institution, make room for something only on campus, spiritual wellness for students, that keeps students safe. And at a certain point that actually becomes a statement that the institutions have to make and decide if they’re going to say, "You know what, we don’t really know how to adjudicate truth claims here, so we’ve got to make room for different institutions to be at the table, and we’ve got to make rules that help keep students safe." And so you’re actually navigating in a multi-faith environment, the complexity of what does it mean to really embrace the fact that when you have many faith groups at the table, you are not making the same truth claims, and you want to serve students and the institution well.

Stephanie Summers: 08:38

And so part of my job was to help navigate those group conversations with questions, and because of my prior academic work, I had a lot of resources in order to be able to do that. So it was really a fun part of the work that I got to do by providing models of where this had been done really, really well, where people could hold on to their deepest convictions and at the same time work together, achieve places of disagreement, and name those, and actually serve the institution so students and the institution benefited from the good work that was being done.

Stephanie Summers: 09:11

Along the way, I had built a relationship with a founding Executive Director of the Center for Public Justice, who I actually met while I was a college student. And so I always had this piece of me that was dipping into these questions of what does it mean to follow Jesus as a Christian citizen? And these are running right alongside the practice of the work that I’m doing,
but they were really ones that became quite salient when there were public policy questions about things like campus access. Who could lead on college campuses? What kind of new rules would allotted to organizations and what kind of non-discrimination codes they would need to follow and not follow based on the institution.

Stephanie Summers: 09:56 And they just became questions of intense interest for me. I love young adults. I think the season of life is a really fertile one, and I had the opportunity to follow in leadership into the Center for Public Justice. Because of those kinds of questions, I was basically invited to come be a part of the team as a result of that. And so it kind of has been this, again not a very step-by-step journey, and certainly not one I would have imagined, but has led me to a place where some of the last 20 years of work that I've done is something that I use everyday in the work I do now.

Dustin Moody: 10:35 Yeah, that's great. I'd love to hear a little bit more about, you referred to this fertile season. And I think we're all experiencing that in different ways. And specifically it seems like Christians in the U.S. have a variety of ways that they approach the intersection of faith and government or the intersection of faith and public policy. So for some it seems like there isn't an intersection at all, that faith is completely separate from their public life or their public expression and never the two shall meet. And for other Christians, for a variety of reasons, it seems like they take more of an activist view, and I use that term broadly, but they see government and public policy as the full or almost full expression of their faith. And I'm curious, where do you fall within that spectrum and specifically, how should Christians in the U.S. approach government, public policy, public life? What are the recommendations that you guys make at the Center for Public Justice?

Stephanie Summers: 11:33 Sure, that's a great question, thanks. So there's a couple things. Now one, you talk about this as a spectrum, and you can categorize the breadth of Christian thought into about five different perspectives, and there's really good books that have been written about this that are very accessible. So I would just recommend your readers work either by Paul Kemeny at Grove City College or Amy Black at Wheaton. Both of them have done a really good job capsulating the five different views that are predominant within Christianity.
Stephanie Summers: 12:09  It's very helpful, I think, to develop some fluency in the distinctives because they're all rooted in theology, so it's not that folks just got up and decided that I'm inclined to be a particular, but they come out of centuries of Christian thought in particular directions. And it's very consistent, so with the theological roots from which the different perspectives come.

Stephanie Summers: 12:39  The Center for Public Justice comes out of the reformed traditions, so when I spoke earlier of the animating question for the organization at it's beginning, Christ's lordship matters to every area of life, is a particularly reformed turn of phrase that would animate then a question about what does that mean for fill-in-the-blank, and in this case that means for our citizenship, for our work in political community, for the work of government. That's the direction that the Center for Public Justice comes from, and so within that spectrum, that's where we pitch, but there is an engagement.

Stephanie Summers: 13:24  That would be distinct from a place that would look at government as an institution to be withdrawn from or always opposed. So to frame the two other options you were sort of talking about. And I would say that it has within the Center for Public Justice, part of what we're trying to inculcate is that our role as citizens is something that we have as an invitation from God. We're actually invited to participate in God's work in the public square, that our citizenship is one way that we actually love our neighbors, and that our hopes for the work of government, whether that's as citizens who are working in a context of electing public officials, or whether we are people who are called vocationally into public service. But our hope for that is that the institution of government will do justice.

Stephanie Summers: 14:19  That's super loaded, but the object would be the right ordering of society in a way that allows all the institutions as well as individuals in society to flourish. So sometimes that's gonna require that government does quite a bit to protect the ability for those individuals or institutions to flourish. So I'll give you an example. The work to protect religious freedom in this country over our nation's history has been very significant. It's required a lot of work on the part of government to make sure both that we are good to one another, that our institutions are good to one another, and that government is good to religious institutions by saying, "These are the points at which we lay off deciding your institutional theological questions, and this is the way we give you room to be institutions that fulfill a particular purpose."
So one super-quick example that literally impacts me every single day. Within the context of Civil Rights Act, religious employment is protected. So it means that faith-based organizations can hire [inaudible 00:15:42]. And it means also that government treats that differently than it treats gender in the context of hiring. So in a sense, I am ineligible to be considered as fit for many organizations sea-level positions because I am a woman. Because the government has said that's a theological question about should women have serious leadership positions in these types of religious organizations, and so we're not gonna decide that question for them, that's there question. But that actually requires a ton of work by government to make sure that they choose that differently than say I apply for a job at Abercrombie and they say, "Hey, sorry, we're not taking you 'cause you're a woman," which they can't do.

So that's an example of the piece of government promoting justice and flourishing, on something like that where government's gotta do a lot of work. In other situations, government has just given lots of room and doesn't have to super specific, and that would be a piece where you could come up with all kinds of examples, but one that's particularly salient to most people is at the level of talking about families. Thankfully we live in a society where government doesn't spend its energy telling us what time our children go to bed, what my [inaudible 00:17:12] should be. I mean I could go on and on and on. The internal ordering, what the major is that I’m gonna study in college. The internal ordering of family life is one that for the most part is left to families as families fulfill their role, and government only gets involved in situations where families have significantly abdicated their responsibilities or has become unable to fulfill them.

So that's a little bit of the type of thinking that we try to inculcate in Christian citizens, but also within officials. And you'll note within that that I'm using both the words individuals and institutions. I think a think piece that CPJ brings to this conversation that's very distinctive is this focus on institutional life as opposed to just individuals. That's a place where when we talk about the work that we're doing, both as citizens and with government officials, we're often trying to help people understand that these questions are not ones just about individual rights or the context of government deciding things in relationship to individuals. But that individuals actually are in
relationship within the context of all of these associations, all of these institutions in our lives.

Stephanie Summers: 18:37 And so it's not as easy as talking about the protection of one's individual rights on something. Although those things matter deeply, that's not the whole story. And so we're trying to inculcate some thinking about that, as well.

Joanna Meyer: 18:53 Yeah, it's fascinating to hear you talk about the power of institutions, and here at the Denver Institute, we talk about that a lot about lasting culture change comes from the slow work of building these fundamental frameworks within our community, whether it's an organization or wave approaching our local government, but I agree with you on that.

Joanna Meyer: 19:14 I'd like to read a quote from your writing. This was an article you'd written about being a Christian citizen and the challenging of work. And then I'm gonna follow it up with a question for you. So you wrote that, "We share the political communities we are developing. Alongside those with whom we have deep disagreements regarding our understanding of what it means to be human, the responsibilities of government, and the purpose of our political communities. However, we must do the hard work of remaining committed to the development of political communities that extend justice to all."

Joanna Meyer: 19:48 So as I think about our public discourse over the last few years, I just think the tone has taken a turn for the worse. And I know we can all point to people, heck, I point to myself sometimes, whether it's on social media or a letter to the editor, or even just inter-personal relationships where Christians are behaving badly. We're not doing the good work of engagement. So I'd love to hear from you, how do we honor our convictions but also honor the other person or another group that has a differing perspective?

Stephanie Summers: 20:24 That's great. So a couple things, first, I think one of the challenges is it takes to feel like I haven't totally made up my mind about my own Christian convictions relative to political life or Christian engagement in the public square. We get tangled up, so it becomes easier to not say anything, or it becomes a place where folks don't want to be the bad examples that they've seen so they say nothing. So first, I would just encourage people to take some of the pressure off oneself.
Stephanie Summers: 21:10 Part of these perspectives that we're bringing are really conscious, but this work has been voiced. It's not the way that we're gonna unlock something by the words that we say that somehow we've rehearsed and gotten perfect. And so there is this element or risk taking or trust in what God will do in terms of the hearts of those people who are sharing and people who are receiving in a conversation.

Stephanie Summers: 21:38 That piece is, sometimes we hesitate because we're not clear on what we think about something. And I would just also encourage folks to do one of two things. Get more clear and that will require some work. What do you think about a particular thing? It might actually require choosing to be responsible to seek answers to the question. But then also, in an engagement with someone else, to be able to be honest about the fact that I don't have it 100% clear in my mind. That often in a discussion, is wonderful way to open the door for some collaboration, and also an opportunity to continue conversations because people feel much less concerns but your agenda is to indoctrinate them into your view.

Stephanie Summers: 22:33 However, I do think it's important that we build relationship where we are quite transparent about the place from which we come. So, a way that I have seen be less helpful, and so I would encourage caution against this, is unrestrained criticism of Christians who are doing it badly. One of the challenges, I think, that we have is that we have, unfortunately, examples of people who are unwinsome and off-putting. And in our engagement with people who may be skeptical about the Christian faith, or at times even hostile towards the Christian faith, those examples are the ones that are large in their minds. And for many of us, those examples grieve us as well. But to spend energy tearing down the work that's being done by others that we find disheartening, actually I think is counter-productive.

Stephanie Summers: 23:36 And so one of the pieces that we try to live by at the Center for Public Justice is this idea of criticize by creating. So rather than spending the energy bemoaning the way that it's not being done well, we're trying to exemplify how you do it well. And so helping move the person who's really fed up or disgusted into a different conversational frame pretty easily by saying, "I can understand why that would be frustrating for you," or, "I don't love that either." Let me talk about, and just pivot because if you're in a discussion where basically the person you're having the conversation with fighting that person in your conversation,
that's not actually where you're trying to have a conversation. And so trying to get out of that engagement for me is helpful.

**Stephanie Summers:** 24:28 I think expressing the basis from which you come from the perspective is really important as a Christian citizen, and this is a conscious thing. It is also a reciprocal thing. Everyone who we will talk with, whether they know Christ or not, has a political autobiography. They have come to their views from somewhere. And so being able to say, "Can I tell you where I'm coming from and how I got this way, or what informs my political views from my faith?" And inviting a reciprocal conversation is often a wonderful way to start. It also requires choosing that engagement.

**Stephanie Summers:** 25:15 For those of us, Psalm 19, we spend time with people who disagree with us quite deeply, and we're in a situation often where we are in deep disagreements about public policy, and we are in disagreement about what government ought do or not do, but we spend time together on purpose. This is a piece of hospitality that we extend. We are often the ones who are on the inviter side, but not always. But the dogged pursuers of these kinds of conversations.

**Stephanie Summers:** 25:51 It also, in these conversations requires naming disagreements. Where we've achieved disagreement. So I remember when one of these conversations couple of years ago with someone where they asked me about my perspective on death with dignity, and my response to them was to say, "You mean euthanasia?" And they laughed and said, "No, I mean death with dignity." And I said, "I heard you." I think this is a place where we will only achieve disagreement, but I would love to explore this more. So it was a place where we were able pretty quickly to realize that there was probably not any place that we were going to agree because there were reasons based on the Christian faith, and then reasons based on their perspective about autonomy rights, but we did not come to any kind of agreement there. But it helped us outline not that we couldn't talk about those things, but that we wanted to understand where the other person was coming from, but work that we might do together on this, we were not gonna be able to do.

**Stephanie Summers:** 26:56 And then the last thing is, you get that practical like what can we do together, and sometimes this is naming just the things that we do agree on are okay. And so at the level of communities, often in a place where there's a conversation about an issue within a context of a community and people are
able to say to one another, "Yeah, I want that too. I don't think kids should go to bed hungry. I don't think kids should have to worry about violence they're gonna encounter on their way to school or in their schools. So what is it that we can do together?" These things turn the temperature down a lot from the larger conversations that seem to dominate the media or our social media feeds.

Stephanie Summers: 27:49
So there is this relational component. There's a willingness to go back and forth in an engagement. There is the exquisite piece around talking about the root of our faith and how it informs our views. And then there's this piece around how do we achieve both disagreement and agreement on what's possible and what you're gonna-

Joanna Meyer: 28:08
I'm sitting here wishing I could bottle these thoughts. They're so powerful, Stephanie. I just hear concepts that you're talking about about an intentional invitation to a person that may hold different views of hospitality, of gracious curiosity, of looking for common ground even if it doesn't mean we get everything we want, that it can further a conversation and build a spirit of unity. And even like you said, turning the temperature down. Such powerful principles that could change our public discourse.

Dustin Moody: 28:41
Yeah, and Stephanie, before we wrap up, there's one other question that I had. I was looking at the speech you gave at Gordon College a couple of years ago doing a little research for this podcast and for the event in March. And you made an interesting comment that I would love to hear a little bit more about. You talked about this individualistic nature that we often approach elections and public engagement with. And you used the term cultural liturgy of democratic politics. And you said, "The cultural liturgy of democratic politics has formed most of us in one that is entirely individualistic. I would argue in some ways they form us to think our political engagement is only about me, only about ourselves, abstracted from the larger context." I'd love to hear more about this, and specifically how would you encourage Christians in the U.S. who want to see change and you want to engage in public life, how can we reframe this individualistic thinking? Because I think the same argument can be made about the Church in the U.S. and this move more towards an individual story rather than a collective one. So what can you bring to the conversation on that?

Stephanie Summers: 29:49
Yeah, thank you. Because observation actually starts for me as a very young person. My Mom worked the polls in every election
when we were growing up. And so I got to go with her to the polls. I loved it because I got to read all day, so it was a fantastic day for nerdy young me. But I observed that people were incredibly annoyed with one another in their interactions, but then there was this people went into the voting booth and they were alone and it was quiet, and after people came out, people didn't really talk to each other, they just left, which was different than other gathering spaces that I was used to in terms of what happened there. So it's just tiny observation from a tiny kid, but what I realized is that something that's really good about how our democratic society has ensured for free and fair elections, is we vote in secret. And that's a wonderful thing for that purpose, but it's sort of inculcates in us just a myopic view.

Stephanie Summers: 31:05  We're just paying attention in that moment to what I think. So unless we have prepared ourselves to back the frame out from ourselves as an individual, and to see who or what we're voting for, it can be really easy to just walk into the voting booth and choose team fill-in-the-blank or make the decision that feels the least bad between the choice of Pepsi or Coke, or center in on the one thing that matters to me. Not the things that matter to the world made up in communities in which we live. Not the things that matter for the world being our neighbors. Not the question of what would it look like to love my neighbors through politics here? And that doesn't always mean voting against one's own interest, but it's a different frame with different question that I'm walking into here making a choice between the least bad option at least according to me.

Stephanie Summers: 32:16  I'm thinking about everyone else in this community and the well-being of this community and who I think is gonna do a better job in upholding that component. That's a heavy lift, and so to move back to your thing about individualism, what usually happens is we feel the weight of that and then we're like, "I'm not worthy. My vote doesn't count anyways. I might as well stay home." I would encourage us to back ourselves up way way back from election day to do the work in community to understand what the well-being of our community would look like. And so, rather than getting to the point where we're just looking through an election guide trying to decide about the least worst options, instead say, "What would it look like if this was really flourishing?"

Joanna Meyer: 33:15  Wow.
And we can't be experts with that on our own. Right? And to connect to the church, as the church as a body, we don't all have the same gifts. And I would argue that within the context of our political communities as citizens, we are not all gonna be attentive to the same things. But man, there are people who understand healthcare, or people who understand education, or people who understand the transportation or the sewer infrastructure. And those people in our communities are unsung heroes in many ways. The reality of our sewage waste being removed from our communities just as well in the rich communities as it is in the poor communities, most of us take that totally for granted, but the reality is that's a decision someone made to make a system work justly.

And so we can be people who actually tap into the resources that are available out there, whether that's other people we know, whether that's publicly available resources, whether that's candidate forums, whether that's other organizations that educate on these various areas, and begin to vision together for what it would look like. And then deal with the reality that it's gonna be proximate. We're not gonna ever have the perfect candidates. We're not gonna ever have the perfect solutions. Public policy always has unintended consequences. It goes with the territory.

As we're in the game with more and more people, we begin to see the larger picture and way, way in the rear view is our perspective on our own personal choice as the driver of a motivator for why I'm in the voting booth. I think in that same talk at Gordon, I shared a story of an election forum that we did in Chicago one year and about all these panelists, and after during a Q & A, this young woman stood up and she said, "I voted for bike lanes." And I was moderating the panel and the panelists looked at me like, "That's not a question, what do we do?" And she was confessing 'cause she basically said, "I voted for me. I bike commute to work and I voted for me. And you guys just got up here and talked about why you're running. You're running for Chicago, but I voted for me."

Stephanie, we are thrilled to have you join us in a few weeks. Thanks for the work that you do, and thanks for being willing to come to Denver. We always wrap our conversation with an action point. So I have a question for Dustin and then I'll answer it. Dustin, what would you like our listeners to do based on today's conversation?
Dustin Moody: 36:15 Yeah, I think this idea of looking for common ground and being invitational, and not focusing on the bad examples is really helpful. I tend to get really angry at things that I see on Twitter. But no one's been convinced or changed their mind in 140 characters or 128 characters or whatever it is now. But I think having real conversations with people who we live in community with is probably a great place to start.

Joanna Meyer: 36:41 Yeah, I've been so encouraged, Stephanie. How you describe Christian public engagement is a way of being in the world. Even that, your vote on election day not as an isolated action of democratic activity, but that it would be the culmination of weeks and months of thinking and engaging and being part of a community. And that's a fundamentally different way of looking at how we engage the world. SO I think our conversation on the 14th will be a gift. And this is a shameless plug for our listeners to join us Thursday, March 14th.

Joanna Meyer: 37:16 Whether you work in law or government, whether you're in media, communications, or even just fascinated by this topic about faith in the public square, we invite you to join us. You can visit denverinstitute.org/events to find out more and to reserve your spot.

Dustin Moody: 37:35 Yeah, and if you like this podcast, as always, subscribe, leave a review on the podcast platform of your choice, or email us at podcast@denverinstitute with any thoughts or questions. Stephanie, thanks again so much for joining us today.

Stephanie Summers: 37:48 Thanks again for having me. I'm really looking forward to being with you in March.

Joanna Meyer: 37:51 See you in a few weeks.