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Joanna Meyer:

You're listening to the Faith & Work Podcast, where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor, and society through our daily work. Hello and welcome to the Faith & Work Podcast. I'm Joanna Meyer, Denver Institute's director of public engagement. I have been thinking about today's guest, Amy Sherman, for weeks. You could say I've been on a bit of an Amy Sherman binge as I prepared for this interview. Some people binge butter pecan ice cream or college basketball games, but I binge on great faith and work books, and with good reason.

Joanna Meyer:

As I reflected on it, I realized how deeply Amy's writing and leadership has shaped my understanding of a Christian's role in public life, and I cannot wait for you to learn from this great thinker today. A bit about our guest, Amy Sherman is a senior fellow at the Sagamore Institute, where she directs the Center for Faith in Communities. It's a capacity-building initiative that helps congregations and organizations more effectively address poverty and injustice in their own communities. She's an award-winning author whose books, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*, and *Agents of Flourishing: Pursuing Shalom in Every Corner of Society*, are what we'll discuss today. She works closely with *Made to Flourish*, a pastor's network focused on pursuing the common good through faith and work, and she also founded *Abundant Life Ministries* in Charlottesville, Virginia, which provides holistic cross-cultural support for lower-income urban families.



Joanna Meyer:

Well, welcome, Amy. Congratulations on your new book, Agents of Flourishing.

Amy Sherman:

Well, thank you very much.

Joanna Meyer:

Before we jump into talking about your work, I would love to learn more about your professional journey. Tell us a little bit about your background. How did this theme of the common good come to be a dominant theme of your career?

Amy Sherman:

Yeah. Well, people ask me that kind of a question and the short answer, I think, is to say that the Lord has been very gracious to me in the sense that I've had a very strong and clear sense of calling that goes all the way back to when I was a teenager and I was on a church mission trip type thing in Appalachia. It was my first introduction, really, to the realities of significant poverty in the United States. That experience spoke to me very deeply and I had the sense that God was saying to me that my life was going to have something to do with the church and the poor, and literally, since eighth grade, that sense has stayed with me.

Amy Sherman:

That calling has taken on multiple occupational expressions over the years with sometimes being more of a scholar person, writing about policies and thinking about the ways that public policy advances opportunities for people, or takes away those opportunities. Sometimes those occupational expressions have been more as a practitioner, so I actually started and ran an urban ministry for a number of years here in my own city.

Amy Sherman:

But all throughout that, there was this sense of God's heart for the poor and my own desire to be a part of that. I think that being introduced to reformed theology and its really big view of what God is up to in the world, the



whole Abraham Kuyper, every square inch is King Jesus'; I think then took that sense of calling and put it into this larger framework through which I realized, "Oh, my goodness, yes, King Jesus is on this really cosmic redemptive mission where the kingdom of God is meant to infiltrate and bring positive transformation in all these different sectors of life in every square inch," and that therefore, working for the common good in every square inch was very much part of what Jesus is up to and what He invites me to join into.

Joanna Meyer:

I love that. You also introduce readers of your work to the word Shalom, which is familiar, maybe for people who have grown up in religious circles, but I often think we have a very narrow or limited view of it. You describe Shalom as one of these overarching values of the Christian life, but how would you define it?

Amy Sherman:

Well, I think you're right, that because that really rich Hebrew word Shalom is translated in the English as peace, our own understanding of the word becomes truncated because we often think of peace as either merely the absence of violence or peace as in, "Well, I'm getting along with everyone in my household, so there's peace right now," as opposed to, "My 14-year-old daughter hates me," or whatever. But this Hebrew notion of Shalom really captures, I think, God's normative intentions for life. In other words, the way things God wants them to be, the way that God wants things to be is this relational construct of the idea of peace with God, that God wants us to have this intimate fellowship with Him as our Creator in this unfettered, beautiful access with our Father, so peace in that spiritual dimension, peace inwardly, a sort of psychological peace.

Amy Sherman:

Part of Shalom is peace with self, being okay in myself because I am the beloved of God and I am made in God's image and I have inherent worth and dignity, and then peace with others, that the way God wants things to be in the world is harmony with others, is deep relationship is deep mutual exchange with one another, with cooperative labor with others, with finding tremendous joy in serving others and being served by others, so there's this relational dimension or social peace.



Amy Sherman:

Then finally, this idea of Shalom as this Hebrew comprehensive definition of peace, peace with the created order itself, so a material or a physical wellbeing in which we have this harmonious relationship with the created order itself and find great beauty and pleasure in tending and keeping the world that God has created and receiving from, from the land all that we need, so peace with God, peace with self, peace with others, peace with the created order itself really gets at this idea of Shalom, and that is how God created the world, that perfect fourfold, peaceful relationships was extant in the garden and will be recreated in the new heaven and new Earth, and therefore, it represents the way things God wants things to be.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah. I just think about how that sense of peace or rightness with the way life is intended to be and how it becomes a fertile environment for all things to grow, which is the opposite of the headlines. I spent the morning before we logged on to record the podcast looking at The Washington Post and The New York Times and I see anything but Shalom playing out there and so it raises questions as individual believers, what does it look like to work towards that? Even in the smallest corners, like you said, every square inch, the smallest corner God has entrusted to us, that really touches on our work and how our daily work is part of it's our response to God's broader call to a life of discipleship and obedience and service. Tell us a little bit more about how you see work fitting into that process of God restoring Shalom.

Amy Sherman:

Yeah. We're expected to steward everything that God has given to us for the purposes of offering foretastes of that Shalom to others. Our work is a central arena through which we engage in that stewardship. We have what I call vocational power. God calls us to use that power to advance what I call kingdom foretaste or Shalom foretaste. You think about how God wants everything to be in the world. He wants a world of perfect justice. He wants a world of perfect harmony. He wants a world of community in the midst of unity and unity in the midst of diversity. He wants a world of abundance and prospering. He wants a world of wholeness and health. These are the characteristics of the kingdom of God. They express what life in the kingdom of God will one day be like in the new heavens and new Earth.



Amy Sherman:

We have the opportunity through our work to use our influence, use our skills, use our knowledge, use our networks, use our talents, et cetera, in ways that offer people little foretastes of that, so bringing about a little more justice in the world, bringing about a little bit more peace in the world, bringing about a little bit more prosperity or wholeness in the world, I think that's how I understand our work as foretaste bringers.

Joanna Meyer:

You introduced this idea that you just referenced a vocational power, the idea that every believer has a unique mix of opportunities and skills that they can leverage for kingdom influence. To me, that is one of the most life-giving and equipping concepts because often, I'll talk to folks that are in the middle of their career or newer who may not feel like they have the title or their authority to make big change, they didn't found their own company or run the show there. Their question is, "Tell me what this looks like to lead from the middle." I think vocational power is critical because it allows every believer to see where they fit and what their distinct mix of opportunity for influence is. Tell us a little bit more about types of vocational power and how a person can begin to discern what their mix of influence is.

Amy Sherman:

Yeah, yeah. In the book Kingdom Calling, I talk about, I think it's seven dimensions of vocational power, but there are things like the particular types of knowledge or expertise that we acquire over time in a certain field of work. Certainly, the practical skills that we have that we are deploying as we do that work. But also things like the position that we hold within our particular work, whether that is a position of authority over lots of people, or whether that's a position as someone who is there to really support and build capacity into others, so position is part of it.

Amy Sherman:

Our networks, the fact that not only are we doing a certain type of work, but we've developed a whole cadre of comrades in that work. We have colleagues, we have relationships perhaps with customers, or suppliers, or if



we're in education, we have relationships with people in the administration and also relationships with our students, and so networks are an important part of vocational power.

Amy Sherman:

What I find when I talk with people about vocational power is that most people don't have a very robust sense of just how much they have and it goes back to something that you mentioned, Joanna, in that if I'm not the big boss, if I'm not the owner of the company, if I'm not the principal at the school, it's hard for me to really have this sense of what vocational power I have, not even to mention those whose vocational power is being deployed in an unpaid environment. Those folks even more have this sense of, "Well, what do you mean? I don't even have a real job. I don't have any vocational power."

Joanna Meyer:

We'll put a link in our show notes to the book *Kingdom Calling*. I would encourage people to just spend some time with that. What I hear you describing, Amy, is a much broader shift in our faith journey, from having a private faith, to having a public-oriented faith, or I should say the overflow of your private faith is a move towards being oriented to God's work outside of ourselves. In your book *Agents of Flourishing*, you include this quote that I'm going to share because I love it. It's from Michael Cassidy, he's from South Africa, and he describes this shift this way. He says, "Conversion marks the birth of the movement out of a merely private existence into a public consciousness. Conversion is the beginning of active solidarity with the purposes of the kingdom of God in the world." Why is this shift so critical and how do you see the body of Christ moving towards the common good as a result of it?

Amy Sherman:

I think that shift that Michael Cassidy is talking about is critical because we are prone to think of God's salvific work in very individual or personal terms. There's a way in which that is absolutely right and critically important. Jesus is, in fact, our personal Savior. We do, in fact, need a personal Savior and Lord. But the purposes of God in the world are broader than only the salvation of individuals. Jesus does, in fact, come to make us new, but He also comes to make all things new. Colossians 1, I think, is a great reflection on this kind of cosmic scope of



God's redemptive work in the world. The phrase, "All things, all things, all things," is repeated multiple times in that Colossians 1 passage.

Amy Sherman:

When we are converted by Christ, when He calls us out of darkness into His kingdom of light, He is then calling us to participate in this larger restorative work that He is doing in the world. Certainly, part of that involves sharing our faith with other individuals, sharing our faith and the glorious good news that individual people can be restored into fellowship with the God who loves them more than any person could ever love them. But it is also a call not only to that personal evangelism-type work, but it is a call to this broader renewing, redemptive, restorative that work that God is doing in the world. One of the ways I said this on another podcast or something that I did a while back was saying, imagine you work in a law office and you've become a, you've become a believer. Well, God loves lawyers.

Joanna Meyer:

He does.

Amy Sherman:

As a new Christian, you also want to love the individual lawyers in your firm and share the good news of Christ with them. But God also loves law and God is interested not only in transforming lawyers, He's interested in transforming law. If you're in healthcare and you've met Christ, yes, God is interested in individual doctors and nurses and technicians finding salvation in Christ. Christ is also renewing the industry of healthcare and wants us to participate with Him in that work of renewal.

Amy Sherman:

Since God is involved in this very comprehensive work, then we also are called to that very comprehensive work, and that gets us back then again to this idea of the common good because I find that sometimes people think that there's some sort of competition, so to speak, between, well, no, what Jesus really wants us to be about is personal evangelism and going out and saving people who are lost, and then other people who are like,



"Well, no. What God is doing all this stuff to bring about transformation and systems and structures and He cares about all this cosmic stuff, and so we have to pursue social justice and work for change," as though somehow those are two separate things, as opposed to saying, "No, these are all part of God's mission in the world, and they have a dynamic relationship with one another."

Amy Sherman:

Pursuing the common good pursuing the notion of seeing more and more and more of the kingdom and the kingdom's values become incarnated and embodied in all these different spheres of life, that work is precious and important to God, and so is the work of seeing individual people becoming ever more renewed and sanctified and made more into the full human beings that God created us to be.

Joanna Meyer:

Such a beautiful picture of the way that we engage our world. I'd like to know a little bit more about your new book, *Agents of Flourishing*. In the very beginning, you talk about how heartening it has been to see churches really gain a vision for broader involvement in their communities. We have a mutual friend, Eric Swanson, who endorsed the book, who talks a lot about that. He leads a movement of people that are all around the US helping churches think more strategically about meeting the needs of their community.

Joanna Meyer:

Yet you push back a little bit. You point to the verse in Jeremiah 29 that talks about seeking the peace of our city and pursue it. It's a vision for the Israelites who are living in exile as a result of their disobedience and trying to figure out what it looked like to engage this foreign culture, which some churches today may feel that same sense of what does it look like to effectively engage a secular culture that doesn't want us or value what we have to offer. But you say, "Hey, I love seeing that churches are embracing this vision of serving the city, but I think we need to press in harder and to ask, what does it look like to do this well?", which has led to this pretty cool book, I mean, *Agents of Flourishing*. Tell me more about your motivation for writing the book.



Amy Sherman:

Well, I appreciate your enthusiasm for it. That's very kind and encouraging. Yeah, I think I had a few different motivations. Certainly, one of the biggies was this disjunction a bit that I was seeing between, on the one hand, an enthusiastic embrace of the vision of seeking the peace and prosperity of the city, which is something I celebrate very, very, very much. I want churches to have this self-identity as actors, really, really powerful actors in their local communities who can be vehicles of tremendous blessing in their localities in a whole variety of ways.

Amy Sherman:

I love the banners. I love the going on the website and seeing that particular verse highlighted and all of that, but it just seemed like a number of times I was finding that the way that vision was being implemented was very inadequate, so I would see this embrace of this massive vision of seeking the Shalom of your city, but then what was the church actually doing? Well, they were having a one-day-a-year serve fest. Everybody puts on the blue T-shirt and has the logo on it or whatever and goes out. I'm not opposed to one-day serve fests. I don't think-

Joanna Meyer:

"Let's go paint," that's what I think of.

Amy Sherman:

... Yeah, those aren't the things that are really going to bring about the kind of transformation that I think the Lord is really interested in. The book was written as a way to say I love that you have embraced this vision. Now, let's really take this vision really seriously and think deeply and well about what are the implications for that and what are the appropriate strategies to follow to actually begin to live into that vision. I feel like there's a good number of particularly young congregational leaders that I've met along the way who are hungry for that kind of discussion and instruction.



Joanna Meyer:

Amy, one of the gifts that I think is very unique to you as a thinker and leader and author is that you're able to take concepts and translate them into practical models that help people understand how to live those concepts out. I think the framework of vocational power, it really quantifies, what does it look like to leverage the situation as God puts you in? You do the same thing in Agents of Flourishing. You use this framework of six endowments that came out of the Thriving Cities Project and you flesh it out and say, "Here's a model for churches to begin to explore," so think about serving their community more effectively. I would like to know more about six endowments. What are they and how does that relate to church life?

Amy Sherman:

Well, I wanted to write a book about how the churches can contribute to the flourishing of their communities. I was looking at different frameworks that have been proposed, metrics measuring, "Well, how do you know you have a thriving or flourishing community?" I came across this group called the Thriving Cities Group and I loved their framework because essentially what they said was that in order to have a thriving community, your community needs to be healthy and strong in six main domains or realms of societal life, which they call community endowments. They give each of these six endowments a label. They are the good, the true, the beautiful, the just and well-ordered, the sustainable, and the prosperous. Those realms map onto familiar realms of activity and institutions that we would all be familiar with. The realm of the true is all about education and learning and human knowledge and the realm of the prosperous is about economic life. The realm of the just and well-ordered is about political and civic life, the realm of law, and the criminal justice system, and governance, and all of that.

Amy Sherman:

What I realized was that as I had really studied the biblical theme of flourishing and how does the Bible understand flourishing and what are the dimensions of flourishing or the characteristics of flourishing. As I listed those out on one side of a piece of paper and then was looking at the six community endowments of the Thriving Cities Group framework and I was just seeing all this alignment between these two things and I



realized, "Okay. Well, here we have a framework that says, what does a healthy thriving city look like? Well, it's got to be strong in these six arenas."

Amy Sherman:

Okay. Well, that means if Jeremiah 29:7 is calling us to seek the peace and prosperity, the Shalom of the city, then one way that we could do that is to think strategically about what is the church's role of strengthening each of those six different realms of life or community endowments, as they're called. I ended up using it as the organizing structure for the book, telling both stories from church history of how Christians and congregations in the past have contributed to each of those six realms of life, as well as sharing contemporary accounts of churches today who, through a variety of ministries and programs, are contributing to strengthening one or more of those endowments.

Joanna Meyer:

Gosh, I love that vision because it creates some categories in which churches can think about my own congregation. Often we're talking about for pastors, if we have any ministry leaders listening, we'll say, "Hey, step one in discipling, your people for work is understanding where your people work. As you think about who they are and how they spend their days, do you actually know what they do?" I think, wouldn't it be amazing to do some, this is a sociological or community-development term, but do some asset mapping. Actually, look at your congregation in these six... I'm getting a two thumbs up on the video for Amy, which is awesome, but do some asset mapping. Look at your congregation and say, "Where do we have people serving in these six areas? Do we have unique pockets of influence? Are there unique needs in our community in these areas where we could equip our people to be having influence and service there?"

Joanna Meyer:

I think that's so much richer and more targeted than having a paint at your local junior high, or host an Easter egg hunt on the lawn and hope your neighbors come. That's like putting God's best people where it matters, or taking advantage of where they already are. There's so many opportunities for us to be thinking more richly



about how we serve our cities and also in a way that affirms and empowers the believers where they are. Amazing stuff.

Joanna Meyer:

I hope people are sensing my excitement for the book because I think it's such a gift to the kingdom, Amy. I'm going to ask you one question to wrap up and that is you had some tips from somebody who's lived on the front lines of serving a community of non-negotiables, things that churches need to be thinking about as they start any project that would be community-oriented. I'm wondering if you could give us a thumbnail sketch of what some of those non-negotiables are?

Amy Sherman:

Well, like you, I think the first place to start is in that inventorying of assets. At the very end of *Agents of Flourishing*, my next steps chapter begins with an encouragement to do what I call a 360-degree inventory, which includes both the church's physical assets, but even more importantly, the human capital represented by the people in the pews, and identifying which domains they are serving in, and as you say, whether there are particular community endowments where a preponderance of giftedness is resident.

Amy Sherman:

All right, for me, this notion of a non-negotiable principle, I guess, is it all has to do with stewarding our power. It all has to do with saying, "Okay, the Lord has put me in this or that domain primarily. Let me do an inventory of my own level of influence networks, power defined as knowledge, skill, et cetera." All right, well, now what am I going to do with that? I think we have to adopt a servant mindset so that we are looking at other people around us in this particular domain that we're in.

Amy Sherman:

We're asking ourselves questions like, "How can I build up other people's capacities? How can I use the power that I have to build up another person's capacities? How can I create new opportunities perhaps for people who have been shot out of opportunities in one way or another? How can I just simply affirm the giftedness of other



people in this particular realm and encourage them to think about how they can be deploying what God has given them for the good of their neighbors?" It's this way of saying I work in this sphere and I have connections to all these different kinds of people through my work in this sphere and how can I use whatever level of influence or power that I have to really be a blessing to them, either by affirming them, building up their own capacity, or creating new opportunities for them.

Amy Sherman:

I think very practically, that can look like you work at an architecture firm, and a couple years ago, somebody has decided that you're going to have this summer internship program and you're going to let college kids who are thinking maybe about being architects come and spend the summer doing an internship and maybe you recognize that all the people that are coming for the internship are all the same color and they're all the same educational background and they're all the same. It's a certain very thin slice of the populous and you begin to say, "Gosh, aren't there minority kids going to other schools who also have this desire to be an architect? Maybe we need to open up our program and be more deliberate about inviting folks in who otherwise wouldn't maybe have that on-ramp." There's this servant mentality, this other-centeredness of how can I steward the power that I have in this particular domain to create opportunity for others.

Amy Sherman: [\(37:21\)](#)

Then I think that the other non-negotiable is to have a kingdom-centered view of the work itself, so we have an other-centered view of people where we're saying, "I'm here to be a servant and to create opportunity for others," and we have this kingdom-centric view of the work itself so that we recognize, "Oh, as I'm here working in this domain, part of what I'm doing in stewarding what God has given to me is I'm blessing other people, but part of what I'm supposed to be doing also is thinking about the nature of the work that we're doing, whether it's healthcare, or law, or architecture, whether it is business, whether it's working in the criminal justice system, whether it's education," and asking questions about, "What are God's purposes for this particular field of work?"

Amy Sherman:



I think about the people, for example, who are involved in the finance sector, right? Part of what it looks like to be an agent of flourishing in the financing sector is to really think about how can I bless other people, or how could I create new opportunities for folks who might otherwise not have opportunities, but part of it is also to sit around and say, "Gosh, what's God's view for investing? What's the purpose of investment?", and to realize, well, the purpose of investment is not just to make money. The purpose of investment is to build capacity in businesses and hopefully to get behind businesses that exist to do good in the world. It's thinking very deeply and well and carefully and prayerfully about the work itself that you're doing as well as thinking about the people among whom you are doing the work.

Joanna Meyer:

Amy, one of my favorite things is to give our guests the final word, a chance to really call our listeners towards greater love for God and service in the world, and so I want to give you the chance to give our listeners a charge based on your writing and your passions.

Amy Sherman:

Well, at some point in this interview, I think I use the phrase "foretastes of the kingdom," that God is on this mission to bring renewal in all things, and that he's invited us to participate in that work. I think the way that we participate is by asking ourselves two really important questions, "What are the particular kingdom foretastes that I have opportunity to bring to other people based on the particularities of my background, who God made me, the sphere of influence that I have, the particular kind of vocational expertise or skills that I have. What are those?" Some people are better positioned to bring justice. Others are better positioned to bring wholeness. Others are better positioned to bring joy, or beauty, or peace, so asking, "What are the kingdom foretastes that I'm particularly perhaps enabled by God to bring to others?" Then to ask the second question, which is, "To whom can I be bringing those things? What people can I target and how can I bring kingdom foretastes in particular to those who perhaps are not as easily reached or not as often reached with those foretastes of kingdom good?"

Joanna Meyer:



Amy Sherman, thanks for your life, for your writing, and for your gift to all of us, to help us learn how to steward our gifts and serve God and love our neighbor more.

Amy Sherman:

Well, thank you so much for having me. I've really enjoyed the conversation.

Joanna Meyer:

Gosh, I love learning with Amy Sherman. If you were intrigued by what she shared today, we have a number of resources to help you keep learning. In our show notes, we will link to both of her books, *Kingdom Calling*, which explores our own vocational stewardship and power, and then *Agents of Flourishing*, which is a brand new book, which helps us think more broadly about engaging our communities from those six domains of influence that she was talking about. We'll also link to a free course, *Foundations of Work in the Faith & Work Classroom*, which features Amy's teaching here in the Denver area, as well as some guided questions to help you dig into the content she shares, so loads of great resources. Thanks again for joining us. Look forward to continuing this conversation about loving God and serving our neighbors through our calling.

Joanna Meyer:

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