

Crossroads: Episode 20

Christmas Confidential: Behind the Scenes of Christmas at the Cathedral

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

What do we find at the intersection of faith and the world? Our new podcast, Crossroads, explores this question in thought provoking conversations featuring guests from around the world who are seeking to live faithfully in the public square. This is a safe space to discuss politics, technology, and our responsibilities as citizens. Pull up a chair and meet us as we search for a better way forward.

Welcome to Crossroads, where we discuss the intersection of sacred and civic. I'm your host, Jo Nygard Owens. Today I'm joined by the Cathedral's vicar, Canon Dana Corsello and Julie DeBoer, Associate Director of Music and Chorister Program Director. Dana and Julie are here to give us the inside scoop of what it takes to make Christmas happen at the Cathedral.

Welcome, Dana!

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Thank you, Jo. Thank you for having me. This is my first podcast recording. Happy to be here!

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And welcome, Julie. We're so happy to have you, too.

Julie DeBoer

Thank you. Also my first podcast. I listen to many podcasts but have never been on a podcast, so this is very exciting.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Well, we are delighted to have you all and so glad that you could join us today. We are recording in our Cathedral studios. I'm in DC this week, so it is wonderful to have this conversation in person. We are talking about Christmas because for our listeners, this episode drops on Christmas Day. For those of you listening in, we are actually recording the very first week of December.

So we have started with our first Sunday of Advent. We've had our advent lessons and carols service, and there is so much more to come. Dana and Julie, can you talk to us a

little bit about what it takes to make Christmas happen? All of the services, everything that goes into it because it's a lot.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Well, Julie, why don't you start since this is the music department's biggest week of the year with Messiah. Actually, I can't believe you're still here standing.

Julie DeBoer

Yes, I'm trying to take it one day at a time. I'm a runner, so I think the marathon analogy works really well here. That Advent is kind of a marathon for the music department and for a lot of departments at the Cathedral. So we just finished Advent Lessons and Carols on Sunday, which is with our senior choristers.

So the older choristers in each group and then with our staff singers as well. Which was beautiful. And then now we're in the middle of Messiah week. So for our choir, that means three hour rehearsals on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday. We've got a performance on Friday, two on Saturday, one on Sunday. And then that's just the end of the first week of Advent.

So Messiah week is always a really, really busy week. But the kids love singing Messiah, and I love working with them on Messiah. One of the things that is really, really fun for me about Messiah is we have a new program in the music area called the Choral Apprentice Program. And so this is for boys whose voices have changed, but who want to still be involved in the music department.

So, we had a few of them singing Advent lessons and carols as well. But I mean, the tradition in the past, of course, of programs for hundreds of years had always been once the boys voices changed, they get very politely shown the door and we never see them again. And so it's really nice that we have boys who are in high school who sing some of the services throughout the year, and they participate in Messiah.

And it's so cool to work with these boys who are now singing the tenor or bass parts in Messiah, but who sang for several years in their boy soprano voices. So that's really fun to work with them. So yeah, we're in the midst of Messiah rehearsals now and then next week we've got school lessons and carols, which is a whole other thing that we're gonna get into at some point. Very fun. And then it's just a sprint to Christmas with Gospel Christmas.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Well, it starts with Blue Christmas.

Julie DeBoer

There we go, yes.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Before we get into those services, tell us how many people you expect to attend all the Messiah performances?

Julie DeBoer

Oh, gosh. It's thousands. I think it's maybe 10,000.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Gets around to that.

Julie DeBoer

Yeah. They're always sold out. I mean, they are very, very well attended. And on Saturday morning we have the Family Messiah performance, which is really fun. It's a condensed version of Messiah and, you know, it's so different from going to a normal concert where there's sort of a vibe of like, we all have to be absolutely silent and on our best behavior, and we kind of embrace, like, it's okay if there are kids screaming during the Family Messiah. And it's kind of wonderfully controlled chaos during that performance.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I love it. How many choristers will participate in the Messiah in a given year?

Julie DeBoer

Sure. So for Messiah, again, that's our senior choristers. So it's the high school girls and middle school boys. So that will be 15 choristers. And then there are 8 choral apprentices right now. So 23 kids from Saint Albans and NCS, and then probably 12 staff singers as well. So the kids all sing the soprano part, and then the staff singers sing alto, tenor and bass along with those boys with the change voices that I mentioned.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Neat. One of the things, I think, as we live in the tension as clergy here at the Cathedral, and I think you do too as a musician and a choral director, is bringing heaven down to earth, you know, trying to bring the incarnation truly into people's lives. When we're in a

Cathedral environment and we have so many tourists, we also have congregation members who, you know, for a lot of people, this is their one time for Christmas.

Like we are bringing Christmas to them. And I don't think what people understand or realize, like you said Julie, people come to one service and they think, "Oh, that's it." So to put it in perspective for everyone who's listening, if you count the Messiah guests, by the time we hit Christmas Day, almost 30,000 people will be through these Cathedral doors.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Wow, that's just incredible. Not to mention all the people who join online, which is thousands and thousands and more.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Thank you, Jo. That's exactly right. And so for clergy and musicians, you know, this is our Christmas too. And so the tension lies in how do we get fed when we're truly exhausted, you know, how do we keep each other smiling and hopeful and really enjoying our jobs, which we do because this is a calling. This is our vocation.

This is what God has called us to do. And so I think for me, this Christmas marathon, and I'd like to think of it as Christmas confidential, is the tension between my own self-care, my own feeling of what Christmas means to me and then also being able to embody it for others, for all the other people who come here.

Because I asked our Jake in our worship department to give me the numbers for bulletins that we print, you're not going to believe this. So from Advent, this is not including Messiah, so from Advent 1 to Christmas Day, 20,000 worship bulletins are printed. That is astronomical.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I know. He was in our worship meeting this week, and again, this is the first week of December. Our bulletins for the end of December for all of those special Christmas services have to go out to the printer this week, right? They have to be done. They have to be perfect this week.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

So the worship team has been working so hard when because you guys had to give them the music months ago probably, right? So all of the details and then by the time Christmas Day is over, if you take Messiah out of it, almost 20,000 guests will come through the

Cathedral. And for me as the vicar, our mission is to create intimacy, to create community all year long. That is so that when our folks come for these Christmas services, they don't feel like everyone else has taken over, because we do have a lot of tourists here, that they still feel that this is my church, even during big holiday seasons. And it really gets me emotional because like, we want them to feel like they can come in and go, yes, this is still my Christmas family and I'm still celebrating the holidays with them.

Even though there are all these other people I've never seen in my life, you know, and as Cathedral clergy and I know as musicians, we're in a really privileged position. We get to work here. It's incredible. Our platform is huge. The things we get to do, the people we get to meet is truly astounding. So I wouldn't exchange that for anything in the world. But at the same time, it's hard. It's a lot. And we're kind of dead by the end of it.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

So you just want to go home and have your Christmas?

Julie DeBoer

Yeah, exactly. But I think that there is that kind of dichotomy here. And I was thinking about this the other day. When was the last time that I went to my home church with my family on Christmas Eve? And it was when I was a junior in undergrad, because after that I always had a church job where I was singing on Christmas Eve.

So that's something, of course, that my family is totally used to now. And the nice thing about here is that my husband sings in the choir, so we are actually both here together on Christmas Eve. That works out.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Well, let me tell you how many years since my husband and I are both ministers. How many years we have been in different churches.

Julie DeBoer

One boy.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And we've never been able to sit in a pew together on Christmas Eve. Never.

The year that my oldest was born, she was actually... both of our children were born, just before the holiday season. So I was on maternity leave with them and could sit in the

pews at his church. But often I'd be in my own church, and he'd be in his church and the kids would get shuttled back and forth. It's tough.

Julie DeBoer

Yeah. And that's how we were until we were both at the Cathedral now. So, you know, there were a couple years where he had a church job in Boston, and I was in Wisconsin. So we were in different places then. But I think what's really nice is that the choir and I'm sure the clergy have this as well, that we kind of try to create our own family experience for Christmas Eve.

So yeah, it's different from being with your family, but you still you feel like you have like a different and also very special tradition being with these people who you're close to in a different way and making music together during this important time. So yeah, I think just especially throughout Lessons and Carols and Christmas Eve, there are so many moments where you really are like, okay, I really this does feel like Christmas to me.

I'm at work now and sometimes it does feel like that. But there are always moments where it's like, this is Christmas. This feels like I am actually celebrating Christmas right now. And exactly the way that I would want to.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

So what are some of those moments?

Julie DeBoer

For me, one of them, I think this is probably true of a lot of people, is the lighting of the candles for Silent Night.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Oh, yeah.

Julie DeBoer

That's always just magical every year. Another one that I think probably a lot of musicians would say, and it's actually become kind of like a joke or a meme at this point. But the final verse of "O Come, All Ye Faithful", the specific like harmonization arrangement that is kind of universal at this point, the Wilcox arrangement, there's a specific chord that happens on "word of the father".

I know you know what I'm talking about, right on "word". And actually, if you Google that, what will come up as a suggestion is probably the "word of the father chord". And then you can read all these articles about that chord specifically, it's just like, "Okay, we have arrived, it's Christmas." It's something about... like it's such a surprising thing that he does with the harmony that's different from all the other verses. And it's kind of... there's like a little bit of dissonance in there. It's wonderful. So definitely that's another moment for me. You should look it up. For Christmas when we sing, "'O Come, All Ye Faithful" on "word of the father" listen to the chord on "word" and you will be like, "That's right. I always hear that specific chord."

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I think we'll add this to our show notes.

Julie DeBoer

You should.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Yeah, I love Advent 1. "O come, O come, Emmanuel", I mean that just, you know, love that I was talking with Scott Sanders and Torry Thomas, our vergers, about this podcast, because they were worried about what I would do and say, you know, because I do have a story. And we were talking about this because, you know, there is that tension between work and worship.

And we are to bring worship and God people, that incarnation. and Scott made this beautiful point. He said, "no matter what it is, I can always feel it. There's always some little revelation. There's always some little thing", he said. I just think that's I've died and gone to heaven with that.

But it's true. I never know when it's going to come. I never know during, you know, all of the services from Blue Christmas to Christmas Day. I mean, I love Christmas Day because those are the people who really want to be there. It's not a family obligation. They're not there with their grandmother on Christmas Eve. You know, they're not there with the masses.

And we walk in and we think, "Who could possibly be here on Christmas Day?" We've had, you know, 20,000 before. And last year there were 1,800 people on Christmas Day. So it's a lot, but it was so special and I love when they receive communion. You can look them in the eyes, you know what I mean? And they... it's just that really intimate connection. And

they're so grateful and everyone's just like, "Merry Christmas!" It's for that moment, all of those thousands of people. I feel like we all have the same values. We all love God. It's tradition, and we're in one place where all is right with the world. You know, that doesn't happen unless you're at a college football game, that's completely different. Or the eclipse. But everyone is here for a common purpose, right?

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

It's something that transcends us. It's bigger than us. And so we can all be a part of it and it brings us together.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Yeah. But I do have a funny story, though.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Oh, good. We were hoping for some funny stories.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

So in 2019, Rose Duncan and I started these Christmas pageants with live animals. When I got here in Christmas of 2017, and they just blew up exponentially. They went from 300 in attendance to 900 to we had to do 2 in 1 day. And there were 6,000 kids.

And this is Christmas of '19. And we had this big giant tent out on the front lawn because we couldn't fit everybody in the Cathedral. We had to do this turn over and we have a photo booth with all these animals. You know, the typical barnyard animals, so your little family could go in the manger and take the picture.

Well, the family that brings all of our animals, it's actually Mary and Joseph. That's their name. Mary and Joseph Cox. Mary's Pony-Go-Round. They come every year. I love them dearly. They brought this juvenile camel. His name was Aladdin, and Aladdin had not been neutered.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Oh dear.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Aladdin was feeling randy with a giant hay bale, and we could not get in-between. This is why it was so funny. Who's going to get between a giant camel?

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Because they bite.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

They bite and they kick. Anyway, so the kids were in hysterics. Their parents? Not so much.

Julie DeBoer

So is that why we have that fake giant camel now? Now at the Family Christmas service?

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

We have always had that camel.

Julie DeBoer

Okay. I wasn't sure if that was like the solution to this.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Yeah, so Mary and Joseph, we asked them no longer to bring Aladdin. Aladdin stays back at the barn. But it was just... you know what I mean. You cannot make this stuff up. This is right out of a holiday Christmas movie because the kids thought it was funny. The parents not so much. And then we had to get in-between them.

Margaret, her dad was actually manning the line, you know, and we're like, "I'm sorry. We'll go get the handler." I don't know what to do.

Julie DeBoer

Yeah. How do you explain that?

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

So yeah, we have so many memories of that.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I love watching you and Rose during the Family Christmas service and your interactions. You play off of each other.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

We run around like crazy people. I think not this year, but the year before. I got caught on a hot mic dancing around, going, "Can you believe a 59 year old woman is acting like a fool and doing this?" And everyone was like, "My gosh, oh no."

Julie DeBoer

The could have been a lot worse though.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Yeah, but you know, the point of all this is to make God real and tangible for the kids. You know, that we get to do that. And that's pretty neat.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

It is. At last year's Family Christmas service, following this service, a little girl came up to me with her mom, and her mom asked if I would take a moment and speak with her. And I said of course. So I get down and she hands me this card and it's a jumble of letters. She was probably three years old and had just written all of these letters in all different configurations inside the card, and she brought it to the service to be able to give it to someone.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

That is so sweet.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And I was preaching the next day for Advent 4, which happened to be Christmas Eve. So it was that crazy changeover between advent 4 in the morning, Christmas Eve in the evening. And she gives me this card with all of these letters. And I had this thought of, "Oh, it's all right here. Everything I need in this jumble of letters, it's all right here." And I take this love and these letters, and I can make it into something to give to people.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Yeah, that's really sweet. That's beautiful.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Julie, do you have any good chorister stories for us?

Julie DeBoer

Well, so next week is our School Lessons and Carols service, which is always just... I don't know how to describe it. It's just all over the place. I mean, literally and figuratively. So it's a Lessons and Carols service like we do on the 23rd and 24th. But of course, when we have our service, it's the liturgy of Lessons and Carols.

It's with the choir who's used to singing at the Cathedral, and School Lessons and Carols is so wonderful. It's all of the ensembles from National Cathedral School and Saint Albans. So we've got the Upper School Orchestra, the Lower School Orchestra, CBA chorus, Middle School Guild, the dancers. It's like it's so many different ensembles and they sing from different parts of the Cathedral.

So the madrigals might be singing while they're processing, and then the next thing that happens is like the, fourth and fifth graders in a balcony. And so it's a lot of choreography that goes into this with the Cathedral music department and the school music departments and the chaplains from the schools. So there are sometimes kids who might be in, for example, the boy chorister group, but they're also in lower school orchestra, and they're also have to run over and sing with their classes from the south transept.

So there's just a lot of chaos that happens during this service. And I remember last year we had one chorister, a little nine year old boy who I guess didn't get the memo that he could just keep his vestments on when he went from singing with us to going and singing with his class. So in his mind he's like, "Oh my gosh, everybody else in my class is wearing their blazer. That's what I'm supposed to be wearing." So he was like, you know, throwing off his robe in the south transept. And then he realized, and I was sitting in the great choir at the time. He realized that he didn't have his blazer like everybody else did. It was downstairs in the choir room. So he just, like, sprinted across the great choir.

Well, people are performing runs downstairs and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, what is he doing now?" And then he came back up and I think this was during like a reading or a call or something. And I'm just trying to communicate with him silently, like, "Do not run across right now." He just ran right across and I just I got him to just like sit with me for a moment to just be like, he needs to go very quietly.

Do not run, just walk. We can't be distracting right now. And so he went over, he sang with his class. And it was really funny because I was thinking like, "Oh, now this just looks so bad. We've got a kid running around who doesn't know what he's doing", and Dean Randy Hollerith was sitting near me in the great choir, and he just leans over and was like, "They're so cute at that age."

Which is true. But I'm just thinking like, you know, we've got so much to coordinate in all of these services and, you know, you've got to keep in mind with all of this coordination going on, if a kid suddenly is like, "I'm not feeling well", or "I got a paper cut and my finger is

bleeding”, or “I spilled something on my robe”. It's like just having the kids involved adds a whole extra layer to everything, but in a great way.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I love it, I love it. We've been talking about hope in a lot of places with our Advent webinar series. It's all focused on hopes, some of our sermons, and certainly we look at the four pillars of Advent there hope, peace, love and joy. So where do you find these things? The hope, peace, love and joy in the Advent and Christmas season here at the Cathedral?

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Well, I think we find it, like you said, within the choir. We find it within our colleagues. I think we have to find it within ourselves to be able to share it with other people. And sometimes that's easier said than done.

Julie DeBoer

Yeah, I find it in the kids that I get to work with. And just to be honest with you, we've gone through a transition in the music department this fall, so that has been difficult. But one thing that has been really beautiful about it is that the kids, and especially the older ones who have more of an understanding of this, have really tried to support the music staff and have checked in with us to see, like, “Are you guys doing okay with being busier this year? How are you doing?” We appreciate you like reaching out to us and being supportive of us in a way that, you know, we try to be supportive of them, but then you find that actually kids have a real understanding of difficulties that adults go through as well. And so they really have been wonderful, and they love this time of year.

And so I get a lot of energy back from them. So even as we're working really hard and, you know, have long days and lots of rehearsals, the energy that they give back to us during this time really fuels us and keeps us going.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Yeah. When I sit down Sunday mornings or for special services and I'm on the YouTube chat with our online worshipers from all over the world, you never know where people are going to be joining us from. It touches me every single week as people start checking in and saying where they're joining from. It blows me away and reminds me that we are this great big body of Christ, spread out over this whole world.

And the Cathedral is such a special place that we bring people together, and we see the body of Christ here in the Cathedral with all of our worshipers, whether they are one time visitors, or join us online or come in person. No matter what. It's truly incredible.

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

We are the holding place for so much.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Well, thank you both. Thank you, Dana. Thank you, Julie.

Julie DeBoer

Thank you!

The Rev. Canon Dana Corsello

Yeah this is great fun. Our first podcast. Now we should take it on the road.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I'll have you back. It is no small feat to welcome 30,000 people to the Cathedral for our services and Christmas programs during the month of December. I'm thankful for Dana, Julie, and everyone who gives their time and energy to make each experience a meaningful one for our guests. What we see on the platform for these services and concerts is just a fraction of what it takes to make them happen.

From start to finish, they require the help of staff and volunteers spanning all department to the Cathedral and numbering well over 100. For our next episode, our first in 2025, we welcome bestselling author and spiritual guide Emily P. Freeman to talk to us about making decisions in the New Year. I know you'll love Emily's gentle invitation into a meaningful New Year.

Thank you for listening to Crossroads. Until next time, peace be with you and Merry Christmas!

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