

## Global Conversations on Discipleship Podcast – Rev. Matthias Fankhauser

**Mighty Rasing:** Rev. Matthias Fankhauser, welcome to the Global Conversations on Discipleship Podcast and thank you so much for being willing and being available for this call. And for people who are wondering where you are from in the world so can you tell me about, you know, your full name and the correct pronunciation, your role in ministry and where you are from?

**Matthias Fankhauser:** Yeah, okay I'm Matthias Fankhauser, which would be the right pronunciation, that is okay. I am from Switzerland, which is in the middle eastern central conference. Europe mostly and a little part of North Africa. And I'm a Reverend since many, many years and I'm specialist in Fresh Expressions, building church in other ways.

**MR:** And one of the things I'm always interested in when I hear about Europe, because I often hear this phrase: that Europe is a post-Christian society. And so, I think, what I would like to ask you next is if you could briefly describe the context which in your ministries operate, the church operate and the people you work with.

**MF:** I think that the description of a post-Christian generation is quite a right description because, it used to be, especially in Europe, you'd have the huge churches where all the people could gather. Just because the church was telling them what they had to do. So, it was a usual thing in the towns and cities that you go to church and listen to the pastor and do what he says.

So, this changed year by year and now we're really in a time where no one goes to church anymore. It's just about, I think just about one or two percent of the people go to church. Some still belong to church but they don't really go to services.

So, the question now is to say: 'How could we reach all these other people?' Let's say this, I think there's a statistic stating that 70 people—70 percent of the people are unchurched people by now in Europe and Switzerland. So, the question would be "how can we reach the 70 percent"? And since they are not in church we have to go to other places. We have to go to places where they live where to meet them at their interests and that's how Fresh Expressions works.

**MR:** When people encounter the church or have any type of exposure to the Christian faith, do they have a negative reaction it's or it's more of like a 'I don't know what you're talking about?'

**MF:** Well it's both. Some are really hurt by church, actually by the people in the church, so they have really bad, bad reactions and others they just don't know anymore. It's already been one, two generations since their parents didn't go to church so why should they go. And even some parents, they didn't have parents to go to church so it's already the second generation really that doesn't know anything about church.

So, there are many people losing come back to church, which means on the other side, it's a big chance, a big opportunity to—to tell them new stories because they don't know any stories from

the Bible. It's really a new thing that you can start with them it's just the way— you have to find a way they think you'll have to think too. So, it's like Paul who said: 'Be a Jew for a Jewish people' and so on.

**MR:** Can you tell me what Fresh Expressions is?

**MF:** All it is... is just church in another way. So, you just try to reach people, to build community with them. I always say: 'you don't do it for them, you do it with them.' I have many ideas, I'm sure you have too. So, you could go either the classic way or you could change your idea to some little concept then go and try to get people, gather people.

And in fresh expression we say: 'you have an idea, you serve for people sharing the idea and build it up so it will be a better idea and then do the stuff with them together.' So, that's the difference here. Because, if you invite nonchurch people to help with a project or anything, they will be a part of it and they will be more likely they share their coming or upcoming faith because everyone has faith, it's just not always the Christian faith.

**MR:** Seventy percent unchurched people with not a lot of idea about the biblical stories that you or I grew up with. And, you said there's doing church in a different way and connecting with people. So, can you share with us some of the ways that you have worked in connecting with people?

I came originally from the Philippines and sometimes you know, and I think I also see this in the U.S. where we invite people to come over to our church and to sit in Sunday worship... and I know that that could be maybe part of fresh expressions but based on what you're saying it's almost like going to where the people are. So, how does that play out in your setting?

**MF:** Well, I'll make two examples, there's one project we have in Switzerland, which is called— there's two pastors there and tasked with... [something]... like an arrow. They throw the arrow, you know, like the Indians did.

**MF:** So, they do actually—yeah start with the arrow. So, it's a meeting where you can meditate while you throw the arrow. I don't know how to explain it in English. But you can— you get the image. So, you're like calmed down have your bow and throw the arrow to the church.

Doing this is a very meditative, spiritual thing. And they talk about a biblical verse or a story they heard during the bow throwing. So, that's one way they gather together with unchurched people, their interest is just the bow.

Or another example would be, it just started a few weeks ago, and she is in a building with an atheist and artist is a theological student and she's talking with the atheist about her beliefs, about Jesus, about God, about creation and during this conversation they build art. And afterwards they have a show with the art they built.

**MR:** I think the term is archery. So, you know, like the bow and arrow—

**MF:** Yeah. That's the word, yeah [laughs].

**MR:** and gathering people together. And then engaging with atheists in conversations and then doing art together as a part of that community building.

You know, I also grew up in— well, it was a campus ministry when I was in, in my university in the Philippines and we have some campus ministries there. Now this is also where I was a part of... where we have a booklet and then we approach strangers and then share with them... this is, like: point number one, two, three and four.

**MF:** Yeah.

**MR:** And then there's an invitation to: 'Do you believe in Jesus? Then if so, pray this prayer with me.' Is that something that's being done in Switzerland if you're aware if that's being done how do people react to that kind of evangelization?

**MF:** Honestly, I hope they don't do it. It's just— that's a classic way to do evangelism. In Fresh Expressions, you really try to meet people to get them— to connect with them to share a little bit of your life with them. So, it's not step one, two, three, four and then you have to pray the prayer I brought you. That would be, again, I do something for the people but we want to do something with the people, which mean we have to share our life. So, that's a really a different thing to do. It's in the conversation, let's say this artist with the atheist it's in the conversation about the believing about God, about Jesus, which helps them gets into, to be on their way. Hopefully, we hope, we pray for it, that someday this, this other artist comes and says: 'Hey I want to know more about you and then it's a time to pray.'

**MR:** What I'm getting is this: relationship is the key to this. It's building relationship also looking for those opportunities to connect and to share interests, find ways to gather and be with other people.

**MF:** And then, of course, you have different ways to connect with people. You can do a chalk coaching for example, which also which we have also in my church. After the chalk coaching you have some lunch together and you already have a connection to the people.

**MR:** You know one of the conversations I've had with a missionary in a Christian minority country and the dominant religion is Buddhism. And sometimes, some of the students in the university where they were ministering with and trying to engage in a dialogue in evangelism, some of the young people said: 'my life is good, I think I'm good. Why do I need your Jesus?' And I think in the context of relative prosperity, and I say relative prosperity, meaning relative to other parts of the world, that I think Switzerland and Europe is seen, perceived as wealthier, at least in terms of food and material resources are more available. How do, how do they react if they hear stories about Jesus or stories about faith?

**MF:** In which way do you mean, react?

**MR:** Like say, for example, in the conversations with the atheists and if the pastor or the church member engages with them about 'This is our faith, this is where, where we are.' How do they react?

**MF:** Well, actually I think it's the right question to ask. Why would they need Jesus? Because, everything is okay, and that's the way they think. And, for them, everything is okay so they don't need Jesus so that's their thinking. And I think it would be kind of from top to down we say yes you, but you still need Jesus because, they don't see it like that.

So, again it's more about connecting together and sharing a part of my life so that they can see why I need Jesus. In some point of their life, all this could all be, like, payback or something you could say: 'Oh, there's more than I have.' And this one will be Jesus.

So, if we go to the people and we tell them with these four points and then we pray together the prayer I have brought to you, they will just laugh at you and say I don't need that. Because, they really don't need it because, everything is okay.

So, maybe in some crisis like right now with the [coronavirus], people start thinking, like, 'what could be more?' And that's another way to, to connect and, maybe, a chance to spread the word.

**MR:** Right. Yeah, I think, this just occurred to me as we are having this conversation that having it like: one, two three, four then do this that, in a way, that is a faster approach or trying to see results faster. But building relationship, connecting, being in community, gathering together, sometimes many people, sometimes one-on-one and it's, it's a slower process, right?

**MF:** Yeah, absolutely.

**MR:** But I think it's being at that place where you are available as a part of their community, as a part of their support group and that's also how church is being done.

So, in this, in this setting of doing the Fresh Expressions, how is the church developing and supporting these fresh expressions?

**MF:** Well, here in Switzerland we have—we started 15 years ago or something like this and we put some money in a bowl where we said this money should be for projects like Fresh Expressions or, or just for the congregation starting something new. And, meanwhile, we put half a million Swiss francs, which means half a million dollars, every year in such projects, which is a lot for Switzerland, even for Switzerland.

Because, Methodist church is not so big here in Switzerland. And, we have this system that you can share your idea and then we talk together what can— could be a next step to get this idea

done, and if you need money there is some money. But still, you will have to try to fundraise your own money to build up your project.

So, we started 15 years ago and we started to spread the idea of 'different church' having church different from the way we do the traditional way. And we had some pioneers come to the Methodist church, and I accompanied them with their ideas, helping them and their project get around to get better become better leader. Living that leadership. And, yeah, that's the kind of thing we do and now since one and a half years, two years something like this, we have a district fresh expressions where all the projects from Switzerland are in this district. So, this is kind of a special thing, which we have here in Switzerland. Which also means for those projects, they are now church. They are, they are not like a good idea anymore, so they are church now. With the same rites, and the same things that they have to do.

**MR:** It's almost like they graduated but from being a fresh expression and now a local church connected to the system of Methodist church.

**MF:** Yeah. So, they are also into the annual conference and have the same rights.

**MR:** Right. So, I think this is a very entrepreneurial way of doing things. So, you mentioned that if there is someone with an idea and then they— you talk with them about it, develop the idea further and then the church provides some of the funding. And then they also need to do their own fundraising. I have two questions in relation to this. Who rises up with the ideas? Are they mainly pastors or do you also attract lay people to do a fresh expression.

**MF:** Actually, fresh expressions are always well-thought for laypeople. So, we have some pastors who try new ideas but, sorry to say that, lay people are better pioneers and some are just not pioneers.

So, but we give everyone— a Bishop just should try it. They just should go for it so if it doesn't work it's okay but still you have to try something. And we have many projects where it didn't work out and I would say that about a third of all the projects work out. So, you really have to try, try, and try again.

**MR:** Well, I would imagine it's a combination of laypeople and pastors but, as you said, there's a good number of laypeople who, who start the fresh expressions. So, since you said also that they need to do their own fundraising, sometimes even if— whether you're single or your married with children and I know that it's expensive, I mean life is expensive in Switzerland and many parts of Europe. How do they manage their, you know, their needs—their financial needs alongside their responsibility with the fresh expressions and then the fundraising part?

**MF:** Well, that's really pioneer thing. [laughs] I think they are so eager to do what they have as an idea that they just find some way to get this money. Like the artist I just told you about she is working in a childcare. She built up this childcare actually herself and so she knows what it takes to build up something new and now she builds up a new church. But she's still working in

her old childcare. And so, she gets the money, she's a single she gets the money for her living there and can start with this project.

Because, if you start a project you don't have any— it's not necessary that someone already occupied there so you can do it next to your work, beside your work. Besides getting the money so [laughs]. So, if it grows then it's getting better if you, you get an occupation there. To start you really don't have to, to get the money from the church.

**MR:** So, yeah. It really sounds like, you know, the startups in the U.S. or even in Europe where: 'I have an idea; I want to pursue this. I will seek the help of, of leaders of the church and then do something very low cost, while supporting myself' and then as it grows along, I knock at the church and 'hey, I need some help.' And that's also the time that you work at it.

**MF:** Just a little addition, I think that the big step for the church is to get to these pioneers. So, what we did here in Switzerland, we started a Methodist [campaign]... So, like a contest something, you could say, where people could just send in their ideas. All they need is their ideas and we looked at it and to win— it wasn't any money to win but it was the support to win.

That's just the startup thing. Most people who start a startup, they want the support they don't need the money to start up. The money comes afterwards. So, and we did it, you can look it up on our homepage it's still there. And there came a few ideas from people not from the United Methodist Church, they just saw it and they thought: 'Oh, that's a cool idea'....

That's a way— that's how we get to the pioneers because usually in the traditional church you don't have or you have just a few of the pioneers and they are already occupied because they are already doing stuff in their church.

**MR:** This is an important insight, for me as well, because, as you said, sometimes in our church we are so busy with existing ministries with existing programs and projects but, and then identifying someone who's not very busy but with the ideas to pursue something may be challenging for many different churches.

So, yeah, I was wondering about the recruitment process how you recruit the pioneers who will start these fresh expressions and I think that— I guess that was my answer. [laughs] You call out: 'Do you have good ideas for engaging with people and sharing your faith?' And then they submitted it.

**MF:** It changed our thinking too, the Methodist way to do things. And this, again, changed the thinking from other congregations about the Methodist church. So, meanwhile, here in Switzerland, other congregations think that the Methodist church is really innovative, which is, actually, not so the usual thinking about the Methodist church so.

We had all this contact with the pioneers. We had this contest and we even put some— how do you say it? — announcements in the paper, in the newspapers where you can [post] descriptions

there and you could, you could send your CD of ideas to us, with an idea of course. So, there are a whole lot of different ways we did the last 15 years or so. Meanwhile, people think here you can bring your ideas and you're going to be helped.

**MR:** You mentioned that sometimes the people don't want the money or at least not at first, but what they need is support. So, in this regard, what kinds of support are they asking and what kind of support is the church and you and your folks with the Fresh Expressions provide to these pioneers?

**MF:** Well I think it's the classical startup thing. You need support about how do I get all this stuff I have to do with the political things around me. You need support in how can I connect with other people. You need support in how can I do fundraising, of course. Yeah, actually what I like the best going with them is those saying I don't know if you heard about SLI? Spiritual leadership incorporation? That's like an annual process you do with a team. So, I always encourage them to— to build up a team and do this process where you think about your values, your wish and your mission, context you're in and all of this together builds up many interesting information where you can build your strategies to reach the people. So, that's what I often do with the people, with the pioneers and usually it's a good thing to just reflect everything.

So, it really depends on the pioneer, what he or she brings with him or her and we have to see what will be the next step. We are always just looking for the next step.

**MR:** Different types of support depending on the needs of the pioneer that comes along. So, for example, somebody comes with an idea and then they go through this process: building a team, reviewing what they need and things like that. Is there a regular meeting after? Like a mentoring relationship and then monitoring so that, you know, like six months in, one year in how are you doing, what do you need things like that?

**MF:** The regular meeting, the mentoring is the right thing to do. We have plans for up to one year but it's just in the startup, it's too far away. So, we do, once again here, just step-by-step and then we plan the next step then we reflect and adjust and do the next step. So that's the way we go.

And we have the luck here in Switzerland that we have two people, meanwhile we have two people, just doing the mentoring with the pioneers so it's getting better...

**MR:** Can you share maybe one or two stories of those fresh expressions that eventually became local churches?

**MF:** All of them became local churches.

**MR:** Wow.

**MF:** Just because we built up this district Fresh Expressions. So, even if you just have the idea you're already a church. So, that's a totally different thinking that we know— we knew until two years ago when our Bishop said: 'Okay let's do it this way.' So, it's easier because they have the same rights and the same dues.

So, I think, it's really an honor—honoring way to meet the pioneers and say: 'okay you're not just a pioneer, you're not just a project here. You are a church— in a different way but you are a church.' So, it's not like a graduating thing so, it's just like if you bring the idea and we start to get it in the church.

**MR:** So, the art conversations with the atheists that, that also—

**MF:** That's a church, yeah. Yes.

**MR:** eventually became a church. The archery community also became a church.

**MF:** Yeah.

**MR:** I mean, you know, I'm just thinking with my traditional hat on that sometimes, you know, when you say church it's like okay... they meet every Sunday, they sometimes they also have other meetings. So, in the U.S. too I think the statistics is that Christians, on average, attend two and a half Sundays of worship service every month. So, what is it like for some of the communities, how regularly do they meet?

**MF:** Totally different.

**MR:** Okay.

**MF:** Yeah, I think what we as 'used to go to church' people, like you and me, we really have to unlearn church. And the way is you just forget everything you know about church and then you take a white paper and say: 'Okay, here I am, this is my context. What would I do to build up the church?' Then you're on the right track. But you have to unlearn church because even I, thinking about 15 years of fresh expressions, still struggle with this Sunday service thing.

In Switzerland... because people don't go to church because they have other things to do on Sunday, they have, like, soccer games or whatever. So, there are family times where they don't have to go to church. That changed, actually. But they will have, maybe, time on Wednesday evening for a nice gathering with a snack or something and a talk about faith; about a life story from a Christian or something like that. But that's— you really have to, to think in a different way out of the box, actually, and then start completely new and so that's why all those projects they gather in completely different ways.

So, for example, we have a farm, a little farm, and they have a— of course it's farm and on farm you can come with your family and they have a program for children where you can meet, you



can go to the cows and every animal which is there and help the farmer with his work and things. And actually, they do, do a brunch together with the whole family and so it's a really a complete different way to live church then to go in on Sunday morning to the service.

**MR:** You know, I look back at Acts in the New Testament, right? And they have many different ways of doing church and like what we have now where every Sunday we gather, for maybe an hour, an hour and a half, but if we look at the New Testament they met in houses, they met in prison, they met in the market so many different ways of doing church. So, I think that the fresh expressions is, maybe, a recapturing of some of that dynamic of the early church.

**MF:** I think so too but you don't have to go so far back in history. We just go back to Methodism early days where they did the same thing. Found out what the people really need and they helped who were there.

**MR:** Yeah.

**MF:** So that's— I think it's the same thing with fresh expressions.

**MR:** Well I guess I remember John Wesley and George Whitefield and his band of travelling preachers—

**MF:** Right.

**MR:** and they went to mines and that's where they reached the people. They went to— I guess just wherever people were.

**MF:** Yeah.

**MR:** So, it's— I think if sometimes we reflect on the cycles of history it's interesting how we uncover some of the, the lessons that we can learn from our history, while, at the same time, addressing our particular contexts. I know that Fresh Expressions originated in, in the U.K. is that right?

**MF:** Yeah.

**MR:** Did you get special training in order to, to start doing this? How did that process go for you?

**MF:** Well, you don't get any training in doing Fresh Expressions because it's just a label. But we did is we had a little group of people from different churches starting up in Switzerland with the idea of Fresh Expressions and we were gathering together almost every month in the first time. And then, we had some people coming to— from England to Switzerland and we could share with them and they could tell about their experiences with Fresh Expressions.

But one thing in Fresh Expressions is that you always have to adapt it to your country, your context, otherwise it won't work. So, it might not work doing any former thing in the USA, I have no idea. So, you will have to adapt these things to your context wherever you live. Maybe in America I think you do— you like to do barbequing so maybe that will be the thing to start, doing any barbeque and then go ahead. I have no idea what you might try.

So, actually there's no real training because, I think we know everything already. It's just that we have to unlearn church, again, and try a new thing. That's what the pioneers do they just try and sometimes they fall down and get up again and try again. And that's I think that's the way to go.

**MF:** And what actually, in Switzerland, here with the Methodist church helped that our Bishop really said: 'Hey, okay let's try it. Just go for it. And if it doesn't work it's ok that we tried so.' It took some years to come to this way but now we are on the really lucky side having a Bishop doing, saying, like, just try and go for it.

**MR:** Wow, that's—that's amazing. So, if people want to learn more about Fresh Expressions and the ministries that you are doing in Switzerland and in your district where can people either find information and connect with you?

**MF:** Probably everything in German, so that would be the first point, you will have to read in German. You could go to the homepage from UMC Switzerland. There it would be under the title *Kirche Anders* which means 'Different Church' there would be— you would find some examples, you would find contact, you would find my number, you can look up my e-mail if you like. I'm willing to share, that's not the problem, it's just the time difference and everything that we got along to so, we can manage it.

**MR:** Alright, that's sounds good and for those of you who are watching or listening to this podcast we are going to post the show notes and the links that Matthias mentioned in our website at [umcdisipleship.org](http://umcdisipleship.org). Just look for global conversations on discipleship.

So, again, Matthias this had been a very interesting and great conversation. I learned quite a lot from you and I do hope that our Methodist people from around the world will learn something new and implement it and learn to be pioneer and if not support the pioneers in doing church in a different way.

**MF:** Thank you, thank you very much.