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Interview: Katherine Leary Alsdorf

Katherine Leary Alsdorf

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Interview: Katherine Leary Alsdorf



Katherine Leary Alsdorf is co-author with Timothy Keller of Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work (Dutton, 2012). She came to Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City in 2002 to establish the Center for Faith and Work to help people nurture a meaningful integration between their faith and their professional work. Prior to this ministry role at Redeemer, she spent 20 years in the high tech industry. In California, she served as CEO of Pensare, an online management education company, and CEO of One Touch Systems, a hardware/software products company. Before that, she was President of Private Satellite Network, a satellite services company in New York City. She also worked in various consulting, sales, and marketing roles, primarily in the technology sector. Katherine received an MBA from The Darden School, University of Virginia, and a BA in Psychology and Education from Wittenberg University. She became a Christian mid-career in NYC through the ministries of Redeemer Presbyterian Church and has taken seminary classes at Regent College in Vancouver. She has been a core member of the Theology of Work Project.

David W. Gill: Tell us a little about your background and how you wound up in business leadership?

Katherine Leary Alsdorf: I was born and raised in New Jersey – just like my parents. Eager for adventure, I picked a college as far away as my folks would let me go – Wittenburg University, which was right on the 12 hour drive limit. After college I was an elementary school teacher in central New Jersey for two years. For years there had been nothing I wanted to do more than teach kids. But a summer job as a research assistant in an aerospace economics firm opened up the horizons of the bigger world. I could either spend the rest of my life in the classroom or I could go learn about NASA and the space program and all these interesting things that were going on at the time. So after two years I left teaching and took a very lowly entry position in a consulting firm based in Princeton, New Jersey.

Gill: Did that take you to California right away?

Alsdorf: Yes I ended up in California a year later with that same company, eventually managing a large project for the space shuttle program. I did that a number of years before I decided that I needed to get an advanced degree in either engineering or business. The MBA won out and I ended up going back to

the east coast to The Darden School at the University of Virginia. Afterwards I moved to New York to join a tech start-up called Private Satellite Network. I ended up as President of that company through the unfortunate circumstance of the company President/CEO learning he had a brain tumor. He asked me to take over. It was one of those life-changing events that threw me into the leadership role. I was a brand-new Christian, so I was learning to be a president at the same time I attempted to learn how to be a Christian.

Alsdorf: A work colleague invited me to Redeemer Presbyterian Church around 1989. She was part of the early church planting team before Redeemer was even launched and kept nagging me about the subject of faith. My reaction was that I didn't want to go to any church --- let alone a start-up church. "I'm in a start-up company; who needs a start-up church?" I was a slow responder to those invitations but in the end I was hounded into the kingdom.

Gill: How long did this period of early nurture as a Christian at Redeemer and as a young CEO at Private Satellite Network last?

Alsdorf: Just a few years, but it was a powerful experience. But then the company was sold and I went off to Luxembourg for a year as a consultant, helping a start-up there. That time was a bit of a spiritual desert. I came back to New York and looked for the next role, but after nine months or so I was off to Silicon Valley for the next job. I went out there to do sales and marketing for a tech company called One Touch Systems and eventually became their CEO. In 2000 I left One Touch to become COO of Pensare and three months into that I was asked to take over as CEO.

Gill: Then in 2002 you moved back to New York City to start the Center for Faith at Work at Redeemer. Would you say that from the very beginning, in the early 90s, your understanding of Christian discipleship included your work and calling?

Alsdorf: Yes, I don't know that I would have been enticed by a faith that didn't embrace the whole of life.

If I was looking for something at all, it was something that comprehensively gave meaning to life. I was a single woman whose life was 90% wrapped up in my work. If Christianity had not embraced the huge portion of our life which is work, I can't imagine that I would have responded in any way whatsoever.

Gill: Could you point to any way the Christian faith affected or enriched your view of what leadership is all about while you were a CEO?

Alsdorf: I remember vividly one friend's insight that was really helpful. I really had never pictured myself in the number one slot in an organization. I thought I would be very comfortable as a number two. So when I got that first request to move into the president role, my response was that I never wanted to be in this kind of a leadership position. But one of my friends at Redeemer said, "who wants a leader who wants to be the leader?" God puts the person in a leadership role that he needs to have there at the time and actually it's better if you're not doing it for your own gain but you're doing it for God's gain. That was pivotal to me - and it has affected how I've viewed leadership from that point on. God has his reasons for putting people in place whether it's the head of a church or a secular business. It's a part of

being faithful to step up and persevere into that role.

Gill: Many would say the key distinguishing feature of leadership as a Christian is the idea of servant leadership. Did you read Robert Greenleaf's book or hear that phrase much?

Alsdorf: As a woman, servant leadership was a very concerning idea for me. I didn't have a lot of theological depth at that point but I had become a career woman at a time in history when women were often relegated to serving coffee and other demeaning roles. And the idea of "serving" in that culture made me uncomfortable and nervous. So I really felt like I had to push into "what does serving as a leader mean for a woman that doesn't put her into a stereotypical role that would actually get in the way of the call to leadership?"

Gill: People sometimes emphasize only the side that says "the true leader is a servant to others" and underplay the other side that "the true servant leads." It is important to serve by stepping up and providing leadership.

Alsdorf: The picture that was helpful to me came from my teaching experience. When you're leading in a classroom, you're drawing the best out of every student you have. I could relate that to my job as the leader of a business - drawing the best out of everyone there. As we work better as a team, the result becomes greater than just the sum of the individual parts.

Gill: What other influences were deepening your understanding of the theology of work as well as management and leadership in general?

Alsdorf: I did read Peter Drucker and my business school experience at Darden was extraordinary preparation for leading in Silicon Valley. Theologically I felt like I was in a bit of a desert until I discovered Regent College in Vancouver BC. At Regent I was once again drinking from the well and it was an incredible refreshment. I continued to go to their spring and summer schools for the next four or five years and was just extremely nurtured in the course of that education.

When Redeemer invited me back to New York to start a faith and work ministry I had Tim Keller's sermons and my Regent experiences. But I was feeling very in need of more resources. Tim had written a few unpublished white papers on the gospel and culture. As I went through his footnotes I discovered Dorothy Sayers . . . Abraham Kuyper . . . I read some of what you'd written on Jacques Ellul . . . I started to hit a lot of the Reformed thinkers like Al Wolters, Paul Marshall, Lee Hardy. Calvin College was one of the few sources of real meaty writing that I found as I was looking.

Thanks to Wolters, I started to look at the intrinsic structure and even goodness of a vocation or profession and distinguishing that from the actual direction the practice of that profession was going. For example you could look at the core values of justice in the legal profession and see how God's work of justice could be done there. But then you could see some damaging directions of the profession, creating an overly-litigious society. So this became a model for us: where is God at work in this vocation or profession? What aspects would God want to see redeemed?

Gill: Let me come back to the challenge of being a woman in executive leadership. It seems that many of our faith at work organizations and ministries define themselves as “for men only” even in our time when women are massively present in business schools and the marketplace.

Alsdorf: Prior to being a Christian I was certainly sensitive to the challenges of winning respect among my colleagues and customers in a technology company that was maybe 70% male. Fortunately I became a Christian in New York in a church that was drawing hundreds and hundreds of well-educated professional women through its doors. So I didn't have the experience some women have had in churches where career-minded women are rare. I have felt at times that church culture focuses so much on family and personal life, to the neglect of work life, that a single career woman would feel very out of place. I asked my pastor in California if I could join the group of CEOs that he met with regularly and he replied, “Well actually it's all men, so why don't you go find a group of women CEOs and you can have your own group?” Well I didn't know any other women CEOs inside the church; there were some outside the church but they didn't feel welcomed in the church. So for most career women in the church, it's been a challenging, pioneering time.

I would love to see the church take the lead in this area rather than be the laggard. Most work environments are mixed at this point in time. Most graduate school environments are mixed gender at this point in time. Redeemer's been an amazing place to probe together, male and female, the common idolatries we have that affect how we work and how we either invite or exclude God in our work. It's been very, very rich. That said, I do think that there's so much more that we could do inside the church to value and take advantage of the gifting and experience of the women in our midst. So, like all things, there are some really good things going on and there are huge opportunities for improvement.

Gill: When you arrived at Redeemer in 2002 what's the first thing you did? You couldn't have had many models for church-based faith at work ministry.

Alsdorf: Well I started by asking “if we're going to invest our time and money in this, what's the end purpose and product?” We would be discipling people who were early in their careers so that, ten or twenty years hence as they moved into positions of influence in their industries and institutions, they would have a clear sense of God's purpose for them in that field or job. If someone is on track to become an editor at the *Wall Street Journal*, what needs to happen now to prepare them for that role? Or a documentary writer... what does she need to be prepared for a different kind of kingdom approach? Or an actor that so far hasn't made it to an equity role on Broadway, what do they need to prepare for when the role comes? Where are the role models to learn from? What is the discipleship that they need in order to be the first fruits of God's kingdom in the often hostile environment they'll be working in?

So I started with the 20 year picture of what I hoped our congregation would look like as a result of this ministry. And then I was able to experiment until I found things that had some effect. The more I experimented with conversations and discussion and themes and ways to approach Scripture, the more I saw the benefit of more intensive theology. Our congregation is highly educated; they've invested a huge amount in their professional education --- and many of them were now willing to invest significantly to develop their faith competencies. Our challenge was how to put that together for them and give them

what they're really going to need.

Gill: I know you've had a lot of vocational affinity groups, like groups of artists or actors or lawyers, talking about how their faith applies in a particular work arena. But it sounds like you've also felt that most of them needed a basic theological foundation, not just the applied, specialized stuff.

Alsdorf: What happened inside the vocation groups was that the discussion would quickly become a sort of rules-oriented debate about things like, "I'm a lawyer, my boss wants me to work on Sunday --- should I work on Sunday?" Or "everyone else seems to be taking the client out for drinks and I don't really drink.... Should I go when the clients are going out to drink?" So often people wanted black and white answers when it was much more of a wisdom and discernment issue. The church can't just provide a catalog of answers --- it needs to provide the deep theological underpinnings and nurture a relationship with God that builds the wisdom and character to be able to answer those questions in the trenches.

Gill: We need to grapple with these challenges with the guidance of Scripture in the presence of a couple of other caring, praying brothers and sisters in the trenches with us. It's a process thing and a team thing.

Alsdorf: When we started almost every person said, "I don't know a single other Christian in my workplace." Some of them didn't even know a single other Christian in their *field*. We are not working in Christendom here --- we're working in a world where people may even be hostile to the Christian faith. It's not like you have a lot of "buds" sitting there to process this kind of thing with. So we work on building that community of relationships at the same time we're providing some theological foundations.

Gill: So getting back to the lawyers, you want them first to understand the grand theological foundations. And then, second, you want them to be in an affinity group where they can work through the practical challenges in the day-to-day trenches. Isn't there a third challenge also? Where are they going to study the rich biblical teaching about law and justice? Where are they going to study Jesus Christ as the "mediator" and "advocate" and our ministry of "reconciliation" or "conciliation"? These are powerful vocational/professional themes and a rich vocabulary inviting a faith and law integration. Where do they dig into that stuff at Redeemer?

Alsdorf: Theoretically they pursue this in their vocation groups. We have been developing and collecting materials and content as we go along but there is no magical textbook for every vocation that says these are the specific parts of the Bible that speak to advertising or law or whatever. We look for papers from Christian professors. We dig for any resources that will help any professional or vocational group to better wrestle with their subjects. Of course just studying the Scripture with your vocational peers generates some very interesting and helpful insights.

Gill: Tell us about the "Gotham Fellows".

Alsdorf: The Gotham Fellowship grew out of our pilots of classes and discussion groups as a way to provide discipleship and public theology training at the same time giving an opportunity for the gospel to deeply change how people approach their work. We had whetted the appetite of the church enough at

that point to be able to invest in this intensive program. We started in September 2008 with just 24 Gotham Fellows but now have 40-44 people in the program, a 9-month intensive theological training program during evening and weekend hours.

Gill: And what about your entrepreneurship initiative. How did you get into that?

Alsdorf: Part of Redeemer's comprehensive vision for loving and serving the city of New York has been that the city needed lots more gospel-centered churches. But it also needed the people of the church to be leading the institutions inside the city and starting new ones. We call it the "gospel ecosystem." We were nurturing those people inside organizations, usually at entry-level to mid-level positions, in hopes that some of them would make it to greater leadership positions. But when you help an entrepreneur from day one, when they're the founder and they can set the vision and goals and strategies and create the corporate culture of the organization, they've got a chance to have a lot of gospel impact.

We decided this was a way to do on-the-job discipleship, coming alongside an entrepreneur and helping them think more deeply about every aspect of launching their new venture. Some of them will become viable institutions changing the city through their gospel-centered vision. We started the Entrepreneurship Initiative (Ei) in 2007. We work with about 40-45 entrepreneurs a year, giving seed money and prizes. We go through a whole business plan competition. We are attempting to create an infrastructure of support around them where they've got coaches and mentors and people (even customers) from within the church to help them get off the ground. The congregation has been great, volunteering time and coaching. We've even had some foundations run by people in the church deliver the next round of investment. We pick winners in the for-profit area, the non-for-profit area, and the arts area so that we're really being broad in thinking about the kind of new organizations this city needs to thrive.

Gill: Do you explicitly ground this to the idea that God "entrepreneuried" a world and Jesus "entrepreneuried" a church --- and showed us the way for creative entrepreneurship?

Alsdorf: Certainly. Creativity and innovation but also *passion*. Secular entrepreneurs talk about the need to have passion, without any recognition that the word "passion" comes from the passion of Christ and that, in his case, passion meant suffering for the sake of others. We want our entrepreneurs to connect to that level of passion. What they're doing is really a "calling" not just a chance to unleash their entrepreneurial energy but to serve the city or the world at large. It's been great to make those connections to deep theological themes.

Gill: Does a church-based center for faith and work need to be single-congregation-oriented or can it serve a partnership of congregations?

Alsdorf: Redeemer has three congregations and eight services. At this point, these three congregations are linked centrally and the center for faith and work supports each of them. But the mission all along has been to spin out new churches and congregations so we're in a lot of conversation at the moment about whether some of what center for faith and work does can be pushed out at the congregational level and what parts of it should stay centralized. We've always been very open handed to serve other

churches in the city so our entrepreneurship program, our Gotham Fellows program, our vocational groups, pretty much everything we do has been open to people from other churches. I'd say the participation is still 2/3 Redeemer but a lot of other people participate on a regular basis.

David Kim has succeeded me as Director of the Center for Faith and Work and my role now is to work under the auspices of our sister organization --- called Redeemer City to City --- to help other cities create a church-planting movement with a faith and work component that brings the gospel into the culture of the city. So I'm helping instill that into the mission and the DNA of churches in other cities.

Gill: If there's a church out there in some town across the USA that says "I love what you're doing there but we only have 200 people, not enough to have specialized vocational affinity groups," what would you advise them to do first to get their church on board with what you've learned?

Alsdorf: The reason we wrote *Every Good Endeavor* was so that we would have an easy way to share the key theological ideas that have resonated with our congregation. I get emails all the time from pastors who are doing study groups with people in their church around that book. But it's a lot more viable to give the theological resources and let the local church contextualize that into the type of ministry that would work in their church setting. It's harder to respond to someone who asks "so how did you create a vocation group?" Rather than the "how-to", I want to be giving the foundational thinking and vision and mission. The "how-to" of creating different groups and applications looks different in every context. There is no one-size-fits-all template.

Gill: Sheryl Sandberg has a best-selling book, Lean In. You seem like a woman who has not "leaned away" from leadership or challenge in your life but rather "leaned in" in the best sense of the word. Do you like Sandberg's book? And is there any sense in which Christian women need to be more willing to be used by God in stepping up to leadership?

Alsdorf: I actually loved her book. I didn't particularly expect to but I loved it. I think she captured the brokenness really well. She had such good sociological research. She really depicted the lack of justice, the lack of opportunity, the lack of joy in the experience of a lot of career women and I think having been part of the early phase of women moving in great numbers into the workforce, I'm excited that that topic is back on the table.

Her solution, however, comes up short. Her "lean in" is "lean into yourself" --- "you can do it!" "You've got what it takes baby." But whether you're male or female, our "lean in" has to be "lean into God." God wants us to be risk-takers and get out of our comfort zone and respond to our callings in the world --- not on our own strength but by leaning into him. I want to meet her and I pray for her that she will understand that there's a God to lean into in the brokenness of ourselves and the marketplace. How can change happen? How do we make this a better more flourishing world for everyone? We've got resources in the Word of God and in our relationship with God that provides so much more hope --- a more realistic hope than just leaning into our own competencies.

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