



Conversation with Chuck Spong

Ashley Hopkinson

October 18, 2024

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself, tell me a little bit about yourself and what brought you to the work that you're doing today?

Chuck Spong: My name is Chuck Spong. I'm the executive director of Love Out Loud in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I am vocationally trained, I'm an ordained clergy. I began in a congregational ministry setting for the majority of my career and largely in the arts area of congregational work. Along the way, as part of my assignments, I began to do stories and videos of some of our ministry partners as well as having conversations as we were developing services for our congregation.

My journey towards where I landed began when we started to focus on Martin Luther King (MLK) weekend and I was considering, how would our church — at that point a suburban, largely white church in Chicago — come to understand issues of justice a little more clearly? We began some conversations with some of our staff members of color. That began both our church's journey and my own personal journey to understanding things outside of my own experience. I was doing that work within a congregational setting and beginning to head purposely towards more of an understanding of justice and equity, and through a series of things came to lead a multi-church set of projects here in Winston-Salem in 2008.

We began to mobilize people from congregations out into the work in the community. I would say with a limited understanding of how to use our sphere of compassion and mercy. Most of it would exist in urgent services and emergency relief. We were just beginning to understand root causes, systems change, policy and advocacy; this developed along the way.

In 2008, we did a shared event and began to network churches together, we began to partner with nonprofits, and just be present in the community space, largely in institutional work. In 2015, we

became a 501c3 and just continued to do that work of showing up and helping volunteers to find places to serve around the community. We developed our own understanding of the greater body of work and have been on a journey to push more deeply into issues of justice and equity.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say is distinctive about Love Out Loud? You mentioned starting from the ethos of compassion and mercy because those are principles of the faith. How else does it stand out?

Chuck Spong: What we've always done from the beginning is show up and build relationally and build trust. That's a distinction of our work. We start with relationship, and then we move into work. We really function as connective tissue in our community. It started largely in the faith community, but we're very intentional to say we're not the only ones that work in this community to say who else does the work and challenge ourselves and the faith community to join the broader conversation. So what makes this unique is the role of connector and convener.

I was just on a call with a Bishop of another church. He's in town and he was trying to get up to speed. He was on the call reflecting to me, "Well, when I said your name, everybody opened their windows, and their closets." They opened themselves up because of the trust we built. That trust building has laid the groundwork to contribute to our systems change and our role in moving towards wellbeing and justice here in our community.

Malcolm Gladwell would use the term maven. We have our ear to the ground as much as anyone in this community of who's doing what and where. We're pushing to understand more deeply— what is community? People with lived experience, what are they doing? We're not necessarily directly accessing them, but who are the people who are? Then what is everybody else doing as well institutionally, civically, and in education institutions, in healthcare? We just have a strong sense of what's happening and mapping those things out to bring to conversations towards the vital conditions and deeper lasting change.

Ashley Hopkinson: I imagine in doing this work and working with different organizations, figuring out what they're doing that's positively creating opportunities for people to serve that you've learned a lot along the way. You mentioned trust. What are some teachable lessons or insights that have stayed with you, that you can share with us today?

Chuck Spong: Yes, fundamentally it's the posture with which we approach one another. If we approach one another with a learning posture, with what we'll say quite often is, we hold space for one another, that allows for us to bring our differences to the conversation. That space also includes the

space to have hard conversations. We began with just saying, let's be friends, if you will. How do we just start to build relationships? As we did that, we would seek to understand. What are you doing, and how does that look, and how can we learn from one another?

It's just a curiosity and a willingness to learn what other people are doing. That was part of the trust-building that happened. In fact, one of the early days when I was leading this group of churches that was starting to engage more broadly in the nonprofit world, I felt really compelled to apologize to these nonprofit partners for the lack of engagement from the faith sector.

Regarding faith groups, I'm speaking more specifically to white faith churches, not the black tradition that is very much involved as this agent of change in community, but the white tradition very much does their own thing, maybe they might partner with another church, but they don't engage in the broader conversations on justice and equity.

I felt compelled to clearly say, "We are sorry that we have been absent from this, the broader work of the community, and we are here to come alongside, support your work, and to learn, and to engage with what you're already doing." The posture of what can we learn from one another.

The other principle is just continuing to show up, because I think coming from the faith institution we get all kinds of ideas of helping out. We think if we were there for three to four years, we've done pretty good when systems change is actually multi-generational.

We've been showing up for conversations about food deserts, educational equity, and health equity for about 12 years now. It wasn't as much early in the early days, but we just kept staying faithful to the conversation and watching for how we might engage in the most helpful way.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is missing from the current conversation? What would you like to see change and come to the surface more in conversations about community?

Chuck Spong: We have much to learn to center community voices. I think that's fundamentally what we have not done well. At best, we have asked the community what they have thought of our ideas... I am not leading that change, but I'm trying to hold space for, and advocate and speak truth to the need for community to lead the rest of us. That's a fundamental part of the shift that has got to happen.

One of our partners, Action4Equity that's here in town. It's a Black-led organization that is platforming community-led efforts in some powerful ways and recalibrating our approaches to community to these deep systems issues we have to address. I probably should frame this — I'm a hopeless optimist. I'll acknowledge that.

Ashley Hopkinson: Do you have a story of impact from Love Out Loud? What keeps you energized about the work of community engagement ?

Chuck Spong: In a broad sense, one thing that always strikes me is people's generosity of spirit despite past harm that's been done. I'm deeply grateful to show up in spaces and people are willing to engage again after broken promises year in year out. That does strike me quite a bit.

There's something special happening here in Winston, maybe happening in other communities. I can't judge other communities. I was on the phone last week with one of our Black pastors who called it Hopeful Skepticism.

We're doing another Thriving Together convening next month. Probably 300 leaders will be in the room. But about two weeks ago we found out, another coalition-based group in the city is doing something that morning. Then I was on a call yesterday and found out United Way is doing another thing that afternoon. It's a symptom of silos and lack of alignment. I thought, the Thriving Together way of understanding how things fit together might help us with this.

We just started to get on the phone with the two other organizations, and said, "How could we make this a day of community versus trying to compete for the same people coming to the different places?" The other two organizations were very responsive to that versus getting dug in to say, "Well, we got our thing. We're down the road on this." They all said, "Well, I'd have to figure out this and I got to talk to that set of people."

The willingness of networks of coalitions actually doing really good things to defer to and come alongside of and adjust for the greater good. That's indicative of some of the conditions that have begun to shift here towards a mutuality among organizations. No one would ever say I want to be self-serving or just follow my own path but the reality is it's how you have to get the work done sometimes, that's a result of it.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you describe what the Thriving Together convening is?

Chuck Spong: A year ago, I was just getting introduced to Thriving Together, and I have been in so many collective impact conversations that I had no desire to do another one. Kellie Easton from Action4Equity; the Black led organization that was really leading the charge, she had some amount of excitement toward this. I was like, "Kellie, if you're in, we're in." When we had our convening, 180 people showed up. We were shocked. Part of that was the trust building that our different organizations had already built for people to say, "Well, if you think this is a good idea, we'll show up."

Everyone was captivated enough by the Thriving Together framework, and how we think about vital conditions and belonging and civic muscle and all the things. We're getting ready to plan our next one. What gives me great energy and optimism is that the gathering is multi-sector and involves letting the community lead us. We have got to be so purposeful. There's a bit of a muscle where we get all these leaders that get stuff done in a room and they can come up with a plan in no short order, and we can activate them to go after a plan, but we want the community to lead us in that way. We want to move at the speed of community, and the speed of trust with community.

That's fundamentally a part of what our communities have got to look like. Not just a bunch of activists, or a bunch of change agents in the room that normally show up for these things. Partly because they're paid to do so, or they've got that kind of capacity, but that we truly seek to have the people most impacted by the things that we're discussing at the center of the conversation, and lift up what's often already happening in communities, but is not amplified for the rest of us.

Ashley Hopkinson: Love Out Loud seems like an organization that acts as a convener. What is your measure of progress since you're operating behind the scenes? In a circumstance like that, how do you mark, this is what progress looks like for us, this is what success looks like for us?

Chuck Spong: That's our dilemma. Our strategic plan is on the wall right here, and that's always been our dilemma. In the early days when I was doing this work, and I was still on pastoral staff at a large church, they'd ask for dashboards and it would be "I met with these 26 people about these kinds of things, and these kinds of things came out of those meetings." It was a quantitative measure, but it was more so mapping out the relationship building. That has been our challenge. How could you measure the degree to which relationships are strengthening and trust is being built. It's something we certainly wrestle with. How do you measure, quantify? How do you mark success in a profound sense and not in just a check of a box sense?

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders, particularly faith leaders, decision makers can do to improve collaboration and advanced progress toward collective wellbeing?

Chuck Spong: Be in right relationship to the community. The leader I was talking to said it more specifically, to be in the right relationship to Black leadership. I think that's fundamentally part of the challenge. We're a multiracial staff and I'm a white man and leading this organization in the South where we've had all this church partnership, but the people that sit in those congregations are CEOs and county commissioners. That's given us access and trust with some of those people. Just on a personal leadership level, I have found myself in some really interesting conversations and trusted relationships where I spend a fair amount of time acknowledging we all bring something.

Everyone thriving together also means we are all working together. We don't want to say to C-suite leaders just sit down and we'll tell you when we need you. We want a deep level of engagement from them, but we need them to approach the work in a way that is more consulting in nature than driving and top down or prescriptive in nature.

In 2020, there was this whole trust-based thing that just suddenly happened because the pandemic was there and so we didn't have time to figure out—what are the measures and the grant requirements. They were just like, make sure people get fed. We were in the middle of doing a drive-thru food outreach where we didn't have to say, do you have a school aged kid? We can only give you meals for the school aged children because that's what our federal grants say. Suddenly, we were able to feed people.

I know we need measures and parameters around those things, but in the shaping of that, it can also bind the work not to be responsive to community or to tie the measures to effective work that it can't respond to what's happening on the community level. We need a role that engages institutional leaders and power dynamics in our city to help us understand how we should approach community in a much different way. A way that is supportive in nature, not bearing down. Even if we say we're going to change funding models, how that gets lived out has power attached to it, and how do we talk very directly about those kinds of things.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support with community on board, what would you like to see prioritized or replicated or scaled?

Chuck Spong: We're a multiracial state that behaves like a Jim Crow system, frankly, and how things happen with the legislature and trickle down to the rest of us. I guess I'm reflecting on the need for people to engage in the hard conversations. There's just been such a backlash; we don't want to talk about those things.

Fundamentally, the community has got to wrestle with our history and our current data and stop trying to kick the can down the field, whitewash it. How does the whole community and particularly white folks or people with power really come together and tell the truth of where we are right now and roll up our sleeves and in a mutually affirming way and move towards thriving together, towards equity and justice?

Our hesitation is to only go so far. We have some very progressive leaders in town that deeply love Winston-Salem, but every once in a while, something will slip like, “We got to be careful that those socialists don't take over and rally,” or something like that. I'm like, “What did you say?”

They're committed to the work and they're funding some great things, but there's just an underlying sense we still haven't gotten down into collaboration with one another. I long for the highly committed to the cause, hard look at ourselves and what we need to reckon with and then what's the path forward? Until we really reckon with where we are, that stuff's still living under the surface. That's my own personal desire.

Ashley Hopkinson: How would you define collective wellbeing?

Chuck Spong: Everyone thriving together, no exceptions. There's all these things we have to think about, but the collective wellbeing of our community means that everyone is thriving. Not just we have really good graduation rates or everybody has some job, but that they have meaningful work and that they might actually be building wealth. That's what we love about the vital conditions and the asset-based nature of how we think about social determinants of health.

Certainly, the center of the framework of belonging and civic muscle, is part of how we really gravitated towards it. That's fundamentally what we do a lot with Love Out Loud. How do we create some sense of connection across all kinds of differences that began with the faith community, but now extends to the broader community and how do we challenge the community to have enough civic muscle to not only do the food backpacks, but you know the senator at the state level who does on the appropriations committee, can you make that call?

To literally challenge people to use the resources that they alone have access to. I have conversations all the time with people like, "Sure, it'd be great if you're a reading buddy, but I'd rather you pick up the phone and call Senator Lambeth to talk about educational funding here in our state," that kind of thing. Everyone using their time, talent, and treasure for the wellbeing of our community—the thriving. That word thriving is just so helpful because people dial into all these different, really important metrics, but that still doesn't get at collective well-being.

If we're all in the middle of the work and we are just so completely spent, that's going to impact how the work gets done. I think a part of collective well-being is the people that are truly passionate and dedicated to the work have got to also care for themselves and for one another. We're trying to lift that up in our work too.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's a really good point. I'm going to keep that with me.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*