Kiana: Hello, and welcome to a new episode of Dunker Punks Podcast. I'm your host, Kiana Simonson. In this episode, we will hear Ben Bear interview Sharon Flaten to tell her story of attending Bethany Theological Seminary in Nigeria. A new wave for Bethany Theological Seminary.

[background music, fades as Ben starts talking]

Ben: Hey there, Dunker Punks! It's Ben Bear coming back with a new podcast and this one, I am pretty excited for this episode. We have a good friend of mine that is joining us from across the ocean, courtesy of the wonders of Zoom. If you have not tried using this thing, it's the new Skype and it's actually pretty easy. So my name's Ben Bear and I have with me today Sharon Flaten. Uh, Sharon can you go ahead and introduce yourself a little bit?

Sharon: Hi. Thanks Ben! So my name is Sharon Flaten. I grew up in Bridgewater, Virginia, and I am now living in Jos, Nigeria.
B: So a little backstory, Sharon and I know each other through a couple of Brethren avenues. We know each other from Ministry Summer Service, which, if you are in college or younger, you should totally consider. And we also were in the same Brethren Volunteer Service unit, which, if you're not dead, you should also consider doing BVS. So um, two really neat connections for us to have in our lives. And it's kept us connected through the years. And so, Sharon, um, recently earlier this year, embarked on a new adventure. And so, Sharon, where are you? What are you doing?

S: So I'm, I'm currently a seminary student through Bethany Theological Seminary. And instead of going to Richmond, Indiana, uh, or staying in Virginia as a connection student, I was given the opportunity, an option to move to Jos, Nigeria, to, and take my classes here at their new technology center, that was built along with, well, the Church of the Brethren here in Nigeria, EYN, uh, and was finished about a year and a half ago.

B: Cool. So, now, here's a question that I personally have. How do you say the name, EYN, like how, what, how do you do? Do you know how it actually is pronounced, because I see it written out and it looks really cool (S: laughter), but I don't actually know?

S: Um, I was really hoping you wouldn't ask me that. I am probably going to say it very badly, but I believe that it said, (spelling via internet) Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (laughter).

B: Cool. That's better than I thought I would have done. Well, thank you for muddling through that. And (unintelligible) bless your heart. So how long have you been over there in Jos?

S: I arrived in Joss back in March. So (quiet at first) July, August, September. So I'm going on my seventh month. And yes, I had to use my fingers.

B: Okay. Seven months. And what motivated you to pursue seminary at this time? Or just in general?

S: (laugh/sigh) When people start asking me about seminary, I have to laugh. Uh, so, where to begin? So last year, I was able to travel to Nigeria for a work camp. Uh, and Nigeria has always been a place that has been near and dear to me and to my family. This is where my parents met back in the late seventies, it’s where my brother was born. It's where many of my relatives have come and spent a little bit of time, and so it was always a place I wanted to go. And so last year, when I returned, uh, I, I very much felt the spirit moving and that God was saying, “Hey, something's up. Um, I think that you think you might need to like listen to this and do some thinking and discerning and see, see where it might go.” And so that was in January of 2018, and I came back very excited about my trip, and my experience and just wanting to, to see, just wanted to start asking some questions. And so, I entered into a season of a lot of question asking of myself, of my church community, of God. Um, so a lot of very intense conversations with crying and confusion. Uh, but I think that that's, that's natural, that's healthy.

And so, one of the things that came out of that and out of my conversations with my spiritual director, uh, she said, “You know, maybe we need to reach out to the seminary because they have, they have just completed this building. Uh, maybe there's some, possibilities for work or ministry in Nigeria.” And so, of course, if you don't ask, the answer is always no. And so, you
need to ask. Uh, and so I, I asked. I sent an email to President Jeff Carter because you might as well just started the top. (laugh) Uh, and he, his response was that it sounded like I had been discerning something that they had been discerning. Uh, trying to figure out how to keep, how to, to use this technology center to, uh find more students and just make some, some more connections across the, the ocean.

Um, and so then he put me, President Carter put me in conversation with some others at the seminary. And what, one of the very first questions that I was asked was, “Have you ever considered seminary?” And I just started laughing, like, hah, coming from my family of pastors and, and all the people that are in my family who have gone to seminary, gone to Bethany, uh, who've done mission work, who've been teachers, who have done so many things. Like, of course, I have considered seminary. Whether I wanted to, or, or, certain family members would say “So when you go to Bethany?” , “So, when you going to Bethany?”. Which never do that to anybody, because then they're gonna say, “I'm not going to do that.” But that was the start of it, of, of the first, of a conversation of a time of, of actually considering seminary realistically, like really. Um, because it would mean that I would be able, potentially be able to come back to a country, to a place, to people that I love. Uh, and so I knew that God was saying something. I didn't think in the moment he was saying seminary, at all. Um, and, and so it, a new adventure began.

Uh, and so, more months continued of discerning and praying and asking questions. Um, and in, guess(?) the fall of, what is that, 2018, I resigned from a job that I love. I was working at Camp Swatara, uh, with really great people, in a beautiful location, doing work that I adored. Uh, to, to try something new, to follow where God was taking me. And it has not been easy, um, in the midst of, all of those transitions because I feel like my life is just always one big, long transition. Um, my, my mom got sick, and then, I, I was able to delay my travels here, uh, which I was very glad for. That's one of the really great things about going to seminary, is you’re working was a lot of really understanding, compassionate people, um, who understand that life happens, and who are trained to walk with you through it when it does. And I'm just very, very grateful to them. Um, and then I was able to arrive in March, and I've been taking my classes just like this. Through Zoom, uh, which is, good, but not always easy (laughter).

B: So, along those lines, how has seminary, I mean, you didn't have seminary you'd gone to before, so you can't really compare it to something you haven't done but, seminary in my mind, is sort of like college two point o, and so it's not quite the same, but it's a little different, a little more intense. And, but a similar structure where you have classes, you have uh, internships, you have that kind of stuff. How is that different? Taking classes through Zoom and being in Jos instead of Richmond. Um, what, what’s that like?

S: So one of the biggest things, and I actually, I do struggle with this is, is it's very difficult to be connected to the seminary community. Um, so you can't just, like in college, you could just, if you want to go see somebody or you want to go get something to eat, you just go and you knock on somebody's door. Or, like when I was in college, you used AOL, instant, an instant messenger (laughter). Um…

B: Oh, that's a throwback, right there! Woo! (mutual laughter)
S: But it's true. And so now you just send a text message. Uh, but I think the hardest thing for me is, just not having that face to face, um, being here. Usually, for the most part, I'm here just sitting in the seat at my table, in my living, in my dining room. Um, and I'm Zooming into a classroom of however many people are gathered there. And so, you, because of the nature of technology, have missed out on the jokes or the things that happened really quickly, Or the conversations that happen over coffee right before class or during the class break, or going out for lunch or dinner, um, or gathering for a meal afterwards. So the community part, or just being able to connect with my classmates, in that regard is difficult. Um, but it's okay. I mean, I, I'm still like professors are still very reachable. Whether it's doing exactly this, I do this probably once a week with some of my professors when I need help or other, uh, hmm, or other, like leadership at the seminary. So, they're all still very, yeah. It's, there's definitely still a relationship there, it's just figuring out how to, how it's different.

B: Are you purely a seminary student? Or do you have other responsibilities within the Church of the Brethren, uh, with the, um, with Jay Whitmeyer's office, with international missions and whatnot?

S: Uh, so, the way that I explain it to people is that, first and foremost I'm a seminary student. Like, that's my number one job or reason to be here. But I'm also doing some work for the seminary, uh, for Bethany specifically. I don't, as of right now, I don't have really any responsibilities or connections to the Global Mission Office. Uh, maybe that will change over time. But my work for the seminary is to actually, uh, promote their programs. Uh, there, uh, Bethany, along with EYN sat down and, and came up with a, a new certificate for biblical peacemaking. Uh, and so, the hope is, to be finding students, uh, EYN or other denominational students, uh, to come and to take these classes because, uh, peacemaking as, uh, we all are aware, is just incredibly important and relevant, especially in this culture and context. And, in the States as well. Um, I mean, everywhere, really, could use a little bit more of it (laugh).

B: Very true. So you talked a little bit about the complications and challenges of trying to take classes and through internet, through Zoom, through the online world. Do you have other challenges that you've encountered that maybe you didn't anticipate, or that have been more of a, speed bone than you were expecting?

S: Uh, well, of course, um, some of them just kind of come with the territory of living here. Not that it's a good thing, but you never know when you're going to have light. So right now, the light is on, but more often than not, when I'm in my class and I'm sitting here all of a sudden, it will just go dark. And then everyone will say, “Oh, Sharon lost her light again.” And here it's funny. It's always referred to as light, not electricity, not power. But it's just the lights, like “Is the light back?” Is like, “Why did they take the light?” Um, so that's one thing that you just have to kinda work with as best as you possibly can, is just having, having light to, to power up and be able to use the technology. But it's actually funny, even, like if right now in the middle of this call, if the light goes, which I pray it does not, um I will still be able to talk to you, because, the way that I use my internet is through a little hot spot. Like, and it's not plugged in to anything. And so even if the light goes, I still probably will have access to the network. To internet, which is, is just kind of funny. Like I wouldn't, in the States everything is plugged in because we're just so connected. And, uh, like we just kind of expect that the, the light is always
going to be there. Uh, so that's one that, I don't know, you, again you just get used to it. But I wish that, and I pray that they'll get the light, the power situation under control here.

The other thing that I hadn't quite expected, is that here in this culture, it's just a drop in and stop by for tea culture. Like there's no “Oh, hey, Ben, I'm gonna come over at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon to talk to you. Is that okay?” Uh, it's very much just a, at any point you will hear, we have a little bell sitting by our front door. You'll like hear the bell and somebody's here and they need to talk or they want to talk about church, or work, or school, or anything. They're just stopping in to say hi. And that's, that I do struggle with just because it's so different. Like I'm somebody, I love calendars. I love schedules. I love being like, “Oh, tomorrow, at two, will be great. I'm gonna write you on my, my schedule for the day, you've been penciled in.” Uh, and so it's been an adjustment getting used to that. Uh, and also, even for me, if I want to go see somebody, I don't have to tell them I'm coming. I can just show up. And that's also just very like, counterintuitive to, I don’t know, everything in the States (laughter). But that's, but that's been good, I think, a good adjustment. Um, it's helpful. So that's something that, that just kind of gets in the way of class sometimes, like I'll be sitting here in class and somebody will come and I'll be like, “I'm really sorry like, I'm in class, you can't come in”, and then that's also, like, rude. (laughter) Um, because if somebody comes over and they want, like, you want to host them and welcome them and offer them tea and… groundnuts or whatever it might be. And be a hospitable, welcoming place. But that's not always possible.

So, yeah, those were probably two things, they're just kind of unique to here. Or at least, yeah, or different from how, things are in the States (laugh).

B: Yeah, that, they're certainly different. Yes. How have you seen yourself grow in your time at Nigeria, in Jos, Nigeria? I know you haven't been there terribly long, the grand scheme of things. But perhaps you've noticed that you have developed a different, uh, a new passion for a particular ministry or that you have a newfound interest in, um, in some component of your work.

S: I mean, there, there is, of course, growth. just in the courses that I'm taking and the things that I'm learning. Uh, I mean, like, any degree, like, you're not gonna love all the classes that you take, but some of them I've been very glad for just getting some new perspectives. And I mean, even right now, I'm, I'm digging more into the New Testament which I've never really done before. And so just some simple things like that. Um, I'm also learning how to… live, well, live more within, like, into the community. Uh, which is, which can be difficult being a… mostly strong, independent female, um, coming from the States, to recognize that I can't just pick up and go anywhere that I want to go, uh, because I don't have a car. I can’t, or that part of town might not be safe or I can't go out at night. Um and so it's, it's learning how to, or relearning how to, like, rely on other people again, like people within the, even within my, my compound. My immediate community that's here. Um, surrounding my house. Um, I mean, it's just kind of a lot of good life growing, like life lessons. Um, because in the States, like I lived by myself, it was me and my little dog. Uh, and then here, even though I do have a housemate, um, the fact that we live in a huge house by ourselves like this, just the two of us is, actually don't like that. It makes me uncomfortable because there should be set like, there’s space for so many more people. But because we're the, the White ladies who live up on the hill, I think there is still this kind of like people try to give us our distance because it's like, well, they're, they're not from here, like
they're not used to this. So it's, it's, I don't know that exactly answers it, but there's just a lot of
general life growing and just experiencing… yeah, yet again like a new way of living.

So, like when I was in BVS, it was learning to live with the whole bunch people I didn't
know (laughter), uh, with and with just different things. Um, each situation is different and you
just never quite know going into it what the, like what growing is going to happen or what
lessons are going to come out of it.

B: Has your trajectory your future changed from what you thought it might be when you
arrived? Or did you really have an idea of what your future might hold when you arrived? Was it
a blank canvas?

S: Uh, well, due to visa needs, cause even for me to come here I needed a visa, um, that
allowed me a year, or allows me a year here. And so that will take me through next March. And
then hopefully I'll be able to renew that visa for another year. Um so I mean, there wasn't really
anything specific because this is new. Like it's, it's an experiment. Like, I am basically a guinea
pig because, most people who go to seminary, um so, oftentimes Nigerians like, want to come to
seminary and they would like, want to go from Nigeria to the States. But then there's me who I
was like, “How about if I go from the States to Nigeria!” and they're just like “I don't
understand” And that question I actually get a lot. People, I try to explain to people, like what I'm
doing and I say, “Oh, I'm in, I'm in seminary” And then they start saying like all the different
seminaries that are here in town. And I'm like, “No, my seminary’s actually, in the States, I'm
just taking online classes” and then they say, “I don't understand that”. Like, it's okay, nobody
does (mutual laughter).

Um, but yeah, but I hope to be here for two years, uh because I am in the Master of
Divinity program. There is a requirement that I have to go stateside and to Richmond, for, I
think, at least a semester. Um, so we'll see how and when and where that fits in, uh and then I
would love to come back. I… most everybody that I talked to, they say, “Oh!, Sharon, you have
to stay. We're gonna find you a nice Nigerian husband, and you're just going to stay here on the
plateau forever.” And I'm not opposed to that (mutual laughter), but it's just really funny. I
actually just had somebody say that to me this morning (laughter). (B: Mmhmm) Like, he, he
had my entire life like planned out for me, and I was like, “Okay, great, good.” (laughter) Uh, but
I do love it here. I mean, it's, no, it's not always easy, but it just, it feels right, uh to me. It's, I feel
like I've been here a lot longer than just since March. Um, and at the same time, yeah, I can't
believe that 6, that 6 months have already passed because, because they all it also went by so
quickly, because it's good.

B: Ya. I can't help but observe that the offers for finding you a husband kind of sounds
like E-harmony coincided with Grubhub. And so you can just kind of put out your order for a
husband (S: laughter) and one will be there soon. I just, the thought struck my mind, and I had to
say it.

S: That's because it, it kind of involves food, which also makes sense for you.

B: Yes, it does. We know each other well. So, (S: laughter) you are, a bit of a pioneer
here. This isn't something that really has a whole bunch of precedents for, at least in our
seminary and in our denomination. What is your hope for these kinds of connections and
relationships between, ‘not the U. S.’ and places that would like to have theologically trained leaders for the church?

S: Uh, that’s a really good question. I also really like that you use the word pioneer as opposed to my guinea pig, because it makes it sound a little bit better (laughter). So I’m probably going to have to start using that. Um, yeah, I mean, it's exciting. Uh, so, the, the way that all of this started was, was a conversation between Bethany and EYN saying, or Bethany asking like, “How can we help you?”

I mean, Nigeria has been, uh, struggling with this issue of insurgency for too many years now. Uh, too many lives have been lost, to many lives have been displaced. Um, and so Bethany was saying “How like, what can we do?” and the, the answer was uh, “Like help us, like train, train our pastors, train our leaders, train the people of Nigeria” in the ways of what they eventually came to of biblical peacemaking. Uh, and so, and that's a really great place to start. And so I, I would love for the program here to grow, uh, the Church of the Brethren here in Nigeria. Who probably has… 800,000 like registered members, let alone the non-registered. So, like there, it's well above a million, and it's growing. The church here is just growing exponentially; it’s actually really quite incredible. Um, even amidst, so much pain and suffering. Um, and so I'm hoping that it will grow here. I believe that it will. Uh, we're just now getting started with everything. And then it would be interesting to ask the question of “Well, this, this worked here, this experiment, this I don't know, yeah, the, this attempt. So where else could we, could we go? How else could, could we support, uh, our other brothers and sisters from other countries? Um, and what they're trying to do?” And I think that it's possible. It is. I mean, of course, with a, a great idea there, there does come issues and things that go along with it. And so we've been working through those. But it's a matter of working together.

Uh, and Bethany leadership and EYN leadership are very much committed to working together to see this through, uh but it's, but, it is a really big task. It's a big project, but I think that it is possible. And it fits into the conversation of “What does it mean for the Church of the Brethren to be a global church?” Uh, and which is one of the questions that we're all asking, or many people are asking right now, is “How can we continue to support one another, and sit together around a table as, as equals sharing and giving and receiving alike.

B: So Sharon. Our last question that we have today. Do you feel like you are a Dunker Punk? And so here's my quick, unfiltered, rough version of what a Dunker Punk is. A Dunker Punk is someone who bucks off cultural trends so that they can fully invest in following the call of Jesus. Jesus’s demonstration to love one another fiercely and to care for those in need and be the church instead of just talking about the church. Do you feel like that's you?

S: So the Dunker Punk concept is a new one to me. Uh, but I believe yes. I mean, even in just the fact that I am here, that I… basically sold many of my possessions like, got out of town, got out of the States and came to a, a somewhat familiar but mostly new place. Uh, like, that's not following, I guess the path most trodden, so to speak. Um…

B: Yeah.

S: And so I'm, when you first asked me if I would be willing to do this, I thought to myself, “Oh, like, am, I really want, a Dunker Punk? I mean, I'm just trying to follow God's
call,” but maybe that's, that's exactly what being a Dunker Punk is. Just doing some serious listening and paying attention and seeing where, what your, where your heart is. What that, how that can fit into what the need is, and what opportunities are out there. Uh, and so, I'll, I'll be helpful and say yes. I think I am a Dunker Punk.

B: Well, let me remind you that if you feel comfortable calling yourself a pioneer, you should also be comfortable calling yourself a Dunker Punk and a Brethren rock star. Because I think all of those titles fit you.

S: (spelling obtained via Google Translate) Na gode sosai. Thank you very much (laugh).

B: I was gonna say, I don't know what that means. What language is that? That you replied in?

S: Housa.

B: Housa. Okay.

S: Yes.

B: Well, Sharon, do you have any parting words for us?

[background music begins as Sharon starts talking]

S: I think just, like I just said. Just pay attention to, to what God might possibly be calling you to. There's so many incredible opportunities out there, uh, some that make sense, and many that might not. Uh, just challenging yourself to, to really listen and discern, uh, where God, where God might be taking you. Because amazing things can happen. You might end up in Africa. The great place. (B: laughter) You all should come.

B: All right, Well, thank you, Sharon, for the time. And we've really enjoyed getting to hear a little bit about what you're doing and the endeavors of our seminary, Bethany Seminary. And, we wish you the best of luck as you continue to move forward in your ministries.

S: (drawn out) Thanks Ben! And everybody else.

K: Growing up in my house, we had a small plaque in my mom's room that read, “When we make plans, God laughs”. I probably think about that once or twice a week, at least. I, too, have taken some journeys that I really had no idea where they would take me: BVS to Cincinnati, Ohio; Ministry Summer Service all over the country with Youth Peace Travel Team. And every time I've recorded a host session, I think I've been in a different state. To me, this feeling of uncertainty has always felt a little fun. But I know it's not always like that for others. And something Sharon said that resonated with me a lot, was that her work was good, but not always easy. And with my journey, the things that have proved most consistently important, no matter where I've been, are community and love. The pursuit of these qualities, I've seen
firsthand prioritized by Ben Bear, and I've had a wonderful time hearing from Sharon about. Definitely two Brethren rock stars.

[music, then fading to background]

This episode really reminds me of what has been important on my peacemaking journey: the community that welcomed me in the Modesto Church of the Brethren, where I grew up, the young adult community that I've had so much fun being a part of, and the support in love I ever received to go out and continue living out the call by those who have walked there themselves.

In Romans, we hear of Paul's work is a missionary, Romans 14 (transcription note: passage starts at Romans 15:14): “My friends, I am sure that you are very good and that you all have the knowledge to teach each other. But I have spoken to you plainly, and I have tried to remind you of some things. God treated me with undeserved grace. He chose me to be a servant of Christ, Jesus for the Gentiles and to do the work of a priest in the service of his good news. God did this so that his Holy Spirit could make the Gentiles into a holy offering, pleasing to him. Because of Jesus Christ, I can take pride in my service for God. In fact, all I will talk about is how Christ let me speak and work so that the Gentiles would obey Him. Indeed, I will tell how Christ worked miracles and wonders by the power of the Holy Spirit. I have preached the good news about Him, all the way from Jerusalem to Illyricum. But I have always tried to preach where people have never heard about Christ. I am like a builder who doesn't build on someone else's foundation. It is just as the scripture says, 'all who haven't been told about Him, will see Him, and those who haven't heard about him, will understand.'

We serve, not because we're forced to, but if I can help anyone see the light, love, and grace that God has shown to me, then I will. Building with the EYN community has been beautifully centering, Continuing the work of Jesus Simply Peacefully Together, and globally, which is good, but not always easy. And that's why we walk with Jesus Christ.

Thanks for listening. And thanks for joining us on another episode of the Dunker Punks podcast. The Dunker Punks podcast is a space for anyone who identifies as a Dunker Punk, to come and be listened to and share their stories of what it means to walk their journey with Christ. This episode was created by Ben Bear. I'm your host, Kiana Simonson, Jacob Krause edits the show and creates our music. Kerrick van Asselt creates our graphics. Dean Feasenhiser transcribes our episode. Suzanne Lay manages production. And thank you to Arlington Church of the Brethren who hosts and sponsors the show. On Earth Peace provides ongoing support and outreach and production support. You can find our archives on iTunes and online at Arlington COB dot org slash DPP (arlingtoncob.org/dpp) and you can connect with us on social media at Dunker Punks Pod or by mailing at DPP at Arlington COB dot com (dpp@arlingtoncob.com). Thank you so much.