

Josh Mangelson

Welcome to the Project, Zion. Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts community of Christ offers for today's world.

Carla Long

Hello and welcome to the Project Zion. Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long and listeners so sorry. I have a little bit of a cold today. So my voice isn't as shall we say, melodious as you're used to hearing. But I really didn't want to miss this opportunity with our guest today. So I'm powering through because you're really going to enjoy today's podcast. I'm super excited to welcome Leandro Palacios from Toronto. Leandro, Did I say your last name? Right?

Leandro Palacios

That was perfect. Thank you.

Carla Long

You're welcome. Well, thank you for being on the show and please tell us a little bit about yourself.

Leandro Palacios

But first of all, um, thank you for thinking about me. Thank you for inviting me once again. I really love to have this opportunity because just it makes me look into what has happened in my life in my ministry over the last few years. And so I am What, Leandro? I am originally from Argentina, which, as it is true for most people, I grew up in the Catholic Church many, many years of Catholic education on first Communion, Confirmation et cetera. Later on, I became a Buddhist for 10 last year's very active member of a Buddhist organization, leading meetings and, um, in the at a local level. And then later on I decided to move to Canada in about I think it was the year 2010 that I visited Community of Christ Toronto congregation for the first time. They might invited me to saying there and well, and today, 10 years after I am the minister of the congregation, things have changed a lot. I lied meditation sessions this year they happen every Monday, and we also have The Sunday service is to stay lectures. And I'm but to one extent involved with all that as well ask things that are happening at the mission center level. So I also I'm two years ago. I, um I started working for kind of the East Mission Center part time, so yeah, so it's been a very interesting journey, and I'm delighted that anyone would like to hear about it, so thank you.

Carla Long

Leandro, I think interesting is an understatement. That what a fascinating story. You already have. And I love that you said the word active Buddhist because in my mind, Buddhism is very quiet and very introspective. When you say active Buddhist, I was like, I wonder what that looks like. So I would be interested in having a conversation with you sometime about what that looked like because I said, really interesting.

Leandro Palacios

That is just I guess what I meant by that is that there was a time that I started. I started reading about Buddhism. Um, just trying to figure out what meditation was, what these practices were. But it was just like a side dish in my life. And eventually I found an actual Buddhist community. And of course, things are totally different. Is not like when you read things in a book, this is a living tradition and people are doing things just like, you know, we know someone who has never been a Christian would have a hard time figuring out what actually happens or what it feels like to go to a church if you've never been to it.

Carla Long

That's absolutely right. And I think that's a really wonderful explanation. And I'm assuming that your time as a Buddhist kind of helped move you into the ministry that you provide in Toronto right now. Is that true?

Leandro Palacios

Yeah, totally. I think that sometimes I say that having had this experience with Buddhism has helped me ease into Community of Christ. I just growing up Catholic. You are very suspicious of any other Christian tradition. So any anything Christian that is not Catholic, you are suspicious about you wonder what's Why is that the cakes? And so it gave me an opportunity to just look at my own. I'm bringing my own, I would say spiritually and religious background with a little bit of an outsider's perspective, so that it really expanded my understanding of what spirituality was. What God means and want our relationship to God or the Divine really is that it really I think what's necessary for me because when I encounter Community of Christ and that was when I started not only just getting to know the people and they were all wonderful, but I also started, like, digging into Okay, So what do what do these people do? And so I encounter Oh, there's all these that spiritual practices that are really emphasized and that are very important in this tradition. And the more I looked at it, the more I realized, well, there's a lot of meditative and spiritual practices and that's how I got interested in, like in this whole new journey, the new chapter in my life. I thought, Wow, I just didn't know that that would be a Christian community that would make so much emphasis on something like meditation.

Carla Long

Well, I know we try. We're not. We're not great at it everywhere, but we're certainly trying. I pushed spiritually practices in my congregation pretty hard. I think it's one of the most important things that we can do. So let's talk a little bit about it. You have these in meditation gatherings at Toronto Centre Place. How did it start? Why did it get started?

Leandro Palacios

Okay, we started in April 2016 so It's been a while. This was soon after, the congregation moved to a new facility, a new church building the congregation was Oh, let's say I made a decision to sell the old church building that was too big for the size for the reality of the congregation at the time. The decision wants to move to the downtown area. So Toronto has a large, a very walkable downtown area, and it is very vibrant. There's a lot of people walking all the time in this very diverse, all kinds of diversity that you can imagine. And that's where the congregation

moved in. One of the goals of that stage that this new chapter in the life of the congregation was we have to make sure that we invite the community into our church building because no one was coming to the old building. The building was just in there, and the congregation was meeting just on Sunday. So what can we do to bring people to do something that this mission alone and that reflects who we are that reflects our values, our principles, and yet has the potential to bring nonmembers, people who have never heard a Community of Christ into our church building? And so we started thinking about well, waken have lectures, and that's what John Hamer does have been doing ever since then on Tuesdays. And I decided, well, if in this church meditation is something that you can do, I'll do it. And so that's how that this is all got started.

Carla Long

I mean, that is very courageous to move to downtown Toronto and I've seen the outside of your building and it's very inviting. I think that that is like the number one thing that we can do is like be visible and because we're so good at welcoming. People were so good at wanting people to come and loving them. If once they're there, we just need to get people through the door so well done. That's very courageous.

Leandro Palacios

Thank you. It's, um I guess that that was a little bit of a process to get the combination into understanding that a church can look like something different. It doesn't have to look like a traditional building that you picture in your mind when you hear the word church. Um, in fact, everyone who walks in for the first time says it is a church, but yes, so it's actually in terms of when you think about how welcoming or how that that this scary factor has decreased a lot because people can't see what's happening inside and that makes it a lot more welcoming to anyone who comes for the first time.

Carla Long

Absolutely. I mean, there's a reason why it banks are like brick with no windows like they want people to feel like they're secure buildings and no one's gonna get inside. And there's a reason why churches should be the absolute opposite of that. Why they should be Windows and why people can see inside and say, Well, what they're doing isn't scary. So I love what's happening. So while we're talking about people, uh, who comes and how many times a week do you meet for all you said on Mondays, Right. So who comes to your meditation session?

Leandro Palacios

Because what we do is in terms of invitation is, primarily online, including social media like Facebook, Instagram and as well ask a lot of local websites that list event and even like local magazines, pre distribution that people can get on a bus stop or a subway. So anyone comes look. And really, this is, um something that we I guess we were expecting, but we didn't know how you know how we would have to be prepared to receive people of all ages. You know, sometimes we get people who come with little kids or their babies through the meditation, we get people off all religious backgrounds, and in Toronto we have pretty much everything. So it's it's very It's very common to get Muslims in a women wearing like the headscarves and Sikhs

with their turbans. A swell of people who may be totally atheists, that they just want videos that stress release or the excited released that that mindfulness promises. We get Christians, we get Jews. So it is in that that's one kind of variety, and H is another riding. We get all people, young people, this it's all ages. We get a diversity up income and education level because we are in a what you would call the transitional gentrifying area. We get people who might be very well see and people hope mine the homeless because we have a homeless shelter only a block away from the church. So it is really you never know what you're gonna get.

Carla Long

I love that. I mean, I know that sometimes it can feel a little bit stressful as a leader at time, you know, because there are different ways that you talk to different groups of people, and I understand that. But Church is one of the few last places that we can go and be around people from all walks of life, and I think that's super important and eye opening for all of us. So, Leandro, what does like a typical meditation session look like? How long does it last and what did people do?

Leandro Palacios

When we started and this is, I guess, almost four years ago, what we had with one hour. We first tried to do it every day and approved to be way too much work that we reduce staff to twice a week, one hour. The idea was to attract people in the after works rush hour that it's pretty brutal. If you try to get out of downtown during rush hour, you really have to fight with crowds even to be able to get into a subway train. So the idea Wes, you have the option to either do that or maybe take this opportunity to meditate for one hour and then just get on the subway when things are a little bit more, you know, just easy in this hour we start, usually with an introduction, because there's always people who are there for the first time. So you have to let them know this is one of this is what's going to happen. This is what you should expect, and this is what you should not expect. There's people who come who have never meditated before, and there's people who come who have, perhaps practiced of many years. And so you have to somehow make everyone understand that that's the reality of the group. I start guiding the meditation, and the beginning is what you would find if you look form. That's a guided mindfulness meditation on you to, or if you go to YouTube or a mindfulness studio in anywhere. So it is. It's very basic breathing exercises, relaxation exercises. But towards the end, uh, of the hour I try to go deeper, and I often read sacred text that may come from our scripture from either Old Testament or New Testament passages that I feel have a lot of spiritual meaning and that can help us deepen this, that we're doing beyond simply the level of relaxation into something else. And I often read from sacred text from other traditions, Not just Christian, Just to show that, you know, this is we're not trying to proselytize here. And that has, I think that's has helped make people feel a little bit more comfortable when I'm reading the Gospels and a parable of Jesus that during a meditation session that perhaps it didn't expect to hear about the mustard seed parable when they were thinking of mindfulness session. And towards the end, I leave them alone to do whatever feels right. If you want to, you can just do a silent prayer, or you can just deep end your meditation in a way that it's more or less spiritual. That's up to you. I give you that opportunity, and that's what usually happens. But, you know, there's a little bit of variations every now and then.

Carla Long

That sounds really interesting and really cool. I mean it. It just sounds like a place I would like to be. So I have told my congregation. Yeah, it sounds great. I have told my congregation that when they do spiritually practices and when they are dedicated to spiritually practices, their life is going to change. So has this impacted your congregation you doing these months, our weekly meditation gatherings? Has it changed people in your congregation?

Leandro Palacios

It has changed people in congregation because it has. It has made us realize that these people who will come and meditate on Mondays, that's where those people that come to participate in the lectures and discussions are the congregation. And that's a reality. So the Sunday congregation is just part of this week long congregation. It has seen a little bit challenging. I shouldn't say a little bit, but it happened challenging to create a single identity as a congregation. I think that there are many, many factors that that are causing this reality. But overall, the congregation on Sunday, whether or not they come to the Monday meant the weekday meditations. They are very aware that there's these new you may want to call the participants, members or friends of the congregation that are part of the life of the congregation. They think about them and they have accepted meditation as part of the Sunday service, which is something that had never happened before. Like this awareness of what this is the spiritual practice that happens here that attracts a lot of people. Let's give it a try. That's part of what we regularly do on Sundays. Another thing that has happened is that there's have been a little bit of crossover. People from one from the meditation group have come to the Sunday service to see what's like. Not a lot of them come regularly, but some at least do come when there's something special, like an Easter service or a Christmas service in. Another interesting thing is that because everything that we do is live streams on Facebook and YouTube now. Often you see what people might the Sunday that folks might not come on a Tuesday, but they're gonna be watching on Facebook and vice versa. The meditation people might not come to the Sunday, but they're watching, so that's we still have to see what you know, where that goes, where that leads.

Carla Long

I have enjoyed watching the lectures as well as the meditation. I've really enjoyed that. So I think that's really cool that you have been dedicated to that because that takes a lot of extra effort to make sure it's Livestreamed. That's a lot of work.

Leandro Palacios

Well, I'm just as a side note for anyone listening to this podcast who might be interested in doing that. It takes a lot of initial effort, but once things are running is it is not. It's not really a lot more than you have to do. It's just like it's additional 5% of work. But of course, there's a setup stage that is you have to invest in time and perhaps equipment. But really, it hasn't affected too much like the ongoing prep that we have to do before each service.

Carla Long

Well, that's good. And so, just in case people are wanting to watch this, how do they find you on Facebook? Where did they go to look?

Leandro Palacios

The easiest way is to follow our page on Facebook. That's Community of Christ Toronto congregation. And if you follow the page and make sure that you get the notified and we go live every Monday or Tuesday every Sunday, we were really encourage people who are not just watch, we just really want everyone to participate, to be to be part of the experience, that not simply as passive observers, but it has been really important. This awareness that we have here of all the people who really regularly participated in all our events because now there's a sense that we know they're there with us. We're just one location out of many, and it really doesn't matter where you are, especially now that we have, we're inviting more and more people to participate remotely, like giving sermons or a prayer or or even like blessing the emblems that that we start here. So that that has really just changed the way we do everything, even our Sunday service.

Carla Long

That's wonderful. I mean, the blessings of community that the Internet can provide is pretty special so I've asked you about how the meditation group has changed the people. And what about how the meditation group has changed you as a minister, as the leader? Have you felt changed in the last four years?

Leandro Palacios

This is what I was saying at the beginning that I really appreciate this opportunity because it's gonna force, is made to think about what has happened, where I lost when when we started with these, uh when we first had this idea and where we are right now and really, I mean, I have to say that what, in a sense it has opened my eyes may curiosity to just continue to learn and has in a sense, in my mind that was somehow that I had so many different components the Catholic components, the Buddhist component and now the Community of Christ component and as a Community of Christ Minister. Sometimes I didn't know how to make sense of all that. Now, through this practice, somehow I've been able to just a reconcile to make sense of who I am as a person. And that has been really important for my ministry, I guess, just to summarize all that, I can feel a lot more confident about my ministry. I can feel that I'm ready to offer ministry more than ever. I wasn't sure in the past I was ready to do it. But these meditation sessions and the meditation group that has emerged have really just changed something in me.

Carla Long

I love hearing that and I love hearing that for a variety of reasons. But one of the reasons is I was right. I love being right. I mean, it's so true that when you do spiritual well, well, I mean, you're wonderful Leandra know what I meant was, um, like when you do spiritual practices intentionally and with the expectation that you could be changed, you are changed and I want what I do. Spiritual practices on the regular. My sermons are better. I'm kinder to people I'm more compassionate to people. I just feel completely different then when I'm not doing spiritual

practices, so I just I just will always want to put that plug out there for people. They change who you are in a really, really positive good way.

Leandro Palacios

And this stuff you mentioned, it's just so I can be so powerful that this same set, you can't help but be kind or kinder. Be just more willing to just to be there to help for anyone who just comes and even like the people that you do you find on the streets and you just see them differently so that that has been really a transformation. I, you know, like I it's, um, downtown Toronto can be a little overwhelming. Sometimes there's too many people, too many cars, too many pedestrians, cyclists, and we all kind of live in this tens environment. Sometimes that everyone seems like an enemy when we're on the road when we're just on the bike lanes. I ride my bike everywhere all year round, and it's a battle sometimes you and against other bikes against, the pedestrians, against cars. And yet this ministry just it's a constant reminder that no, these were people, and we're in it all together.

Carla Long

I love I love that you said that. I think that that is such a beautiful byproduct of the spiritual practices. I think that's the reason we, that God calls us to do them. One of my favorite quotes and I of all time is only six words long, and it's from Catherine of Genoa, and I could even be wrong. I could be saying it's from the wrong person, but even but it's called or the quote goes, "The me in me is God" and I. The more we get to know ourselves through spiritual practices or through counseling or therapy, whatever I feel like that's where God lives, and that's how we get to know who God is. So for me, that just makes so much sense anyway.

Leandro Palacios

"The me in me is God" That's powerful.

Carla Long

Yeah, it is! It is only six words. Uh, so only Andrew. I'm kind of hoping that we could help other people to it. Like if other people are listening to this podcast and fake. You know what? That could be really helpful for my congregation. You know, we could use some of your knowledge on this, Like, if so, if another congregation wouldn't do something like this, what are some tips for them, or what would they need to know to do that?

Leandro Palacios

Well, as I mentioned earlier, the first thing that he have to ask yourself is whether this idea that you have in mind this missional in any way whether it reflects who we are, our values, our principles, um, most likely the answer is going to be yes. Second is, I guess, are you ready to just face it and face a reality? Because our expectation is that we're just gonna start something new, and all of a sudden, just people are just gonna plot into our church building. And I heard that a lot I've been to congregations in here and can ease where they tell me what we started. Something way did all this, and it's a lot. So much work and nobody came on, and I just I can't help telling them, you have no idea how many times I meditated alone, just me in that room. And of course, it's not nice because you've prepared a lot of you just like you cleaned up, You

said after mats in the cushions and the chairs and the food, he went to the course that you did it all and then nobody came. So that's not nice. But if you know you just can't give up, so you have to expect that it's not gonna be easy. So that's number two and then, you know, really is something that it's probably not true with every congregation, but it's true in a lot of allegations that have been, too, is that it's sometimes the space is not really conducive to spirituality. You walk into the room where we're supposed to just clear our minds, and the room is filled with clutter. There's piles of chairs, some boxes and just things that have been there that no one has touched for years because you probably that's where, that's a room where you can do that this event, and you have to remember you have to make it easy for people something a little bit to get into it. They're there for the first time. There's a lot going on in their minds, and you have to help them. When we something that is I observed a lot. It's when just impressions that people get when they walk into the room for the first time and they see that the room looks in a particular way and the reaction is this is so spiritual, and at that moment it's, you know, that their experience is gonna be so much better. They're just gonna let go off this, this fear that they have of being in a new place. And if they're not Christian, being in a church, another thing. And this is what we learned this the hard way, Yes, just don't get stuck with your initial idea. Sometimes we think that well, way we have to be innovative on the innovation happens only once, and then that's it. You have to just go and keep trying and that really sometimes people will tell you how you should do things that happens. A lot, so you just pay attention to those clues that sometimes they're not necessarily verbal. But you have to see what works and be ready to say, well maybe Wednesday doesn't work. Let's try Tuesday, maybe Tuesday doesn't work, let's etcetera. And finally, I think this is something that we learned, I guess very recently, people I feel at least in a place like this in a big city are really craving for community, really craving for making connection at a deeper level with other people because they just don't have that opportunity anywhere. Because every conversation that you have with in your regular life is perhaps superficial. You don't have anyone to talk about important things. For a long time we were not facilitating that we were making people just meditate and have a good time with the practice. But I think that the community building is so important and we only started this year, so we've only done it a few times, just really intentionally facilitating people's sharing. And that has been so far and enormous immediate success.

Carla Long

I really love what you're bringing up here. I love that you're talking about unclear during the space which I think that people might not think about. You know, um, also that, you know, sometimes when we start a new ministry, if a congregation, we are so married to the idea that it has to be this way or no way. And I love that you brought up that way. You know what? It doesn't always have to be one way. There's a lot of different ways that thing's gonna happen and that can, that community building part is essential. I think I feel like people are yearning to go deeper all the time. They're desperate for connection because, like you said, we go to our job like if you live by yourself, you get on the subway, you go to your job, you do your job, you get on the subway, you go home and you're by yourself. And that is that's a hard life to live. And God did not want us to be by ourselves all the time.

Leandro Palacios

That's not who we are. We are social beings. Community. We just cannot survive, isolated, and yet we are. I have to confess. I don't even know who my next door neighbors are, and that's the norm in the city. So it is, it is very important not only to just provide this kind of ministry, where people are just gonna come and learn how to meditate and be inquired to mind and have a personal spiritual experience, but also to bring this peace, this mindfulness, the spirituality at work and in just built community with that. So this year we started a second event after the meditation that we have a traditionally done. So we started six, and that's our hour where we said in silence. So as I was describing before and I guide and then I let them do their own thing. But after that, we gather together and we have small group meditation. And this is something that it might be familiar to many of you because it goes by many names. We call it interpersonal meditation, but people call it things like sacred listening, listening circles, empathy, circles, deep listening, active listening. Basically, one person speaks and the rest of the small group listens, and there's reflection and there's mindfulness in between that, really, that has totally changed the group, like people just doing that once the next time they come, everyone's having each other and just talking about things and there, just like it feels like this is a community and we only started this month with this so that, um I mean, I wish we've known that before.

Carla Long

Well, I mean that there's always time in, like you're like you said you told if you're starting this new ministry, be open to new ideas and maybe it wasn't time before, but it is definitely time now. So well done. We do something similar in the Salt Lake congregation for Sunday school two Sundays a month, and we just do and check in with people. And I asked a few questions, and I have sat in that that is strengthened our community more than probably anything else that we've done. So I think that that's a really, really important point. Thank you for making it. Another issue that people have when they want to start. A new ministry of the congregation is how do you get connected with people? How do you let people know this is happening? And I know you've already mentioned Facebook and Instagram. I don't know if you mentioned Twitter or not. But do you have any other ideas for how people can get the word out there? It could end in others.

Leandro Palacios

Yeah, I didn't mention Twitter just cause I don't I don't use Twitter personally, but if you do Twitter than do you said cause there's people out there way have the advantage that because we're but right there on the street and we would put our sign and people see it. So we also get a lot of people from the neighborhood that just see, Oh, there's meditation here. Let's try it Way were under at a lower level of the kind of medium power. So a lot of people from the building come thinking that that's Oh, this is part of the kind of medium. So my condo offers meditation and they don't even know it's church, but eventually they learn. But yeah, I think invitation is, I mean, I wish it were easier, but it's just something that you have to do constantly on. Um, but it can be very energizing so, and we see the difference when we spend time inviting and when we don't because we may sometimes we have like there was one Monday a couple weeks ago that we have her, like 40 people who showed up for meditation, and there

have been times, very recently. There's there were less than 10 and the difference is what you have to make sure that it just keep telling people about it, because this is how I guess it falls under the umbrella out marketing. If you see something on your screen on your computer or your TV and you see it just once, most likely you're not gonna pay attention to it. You have to see it many times. I'll tell you, started noticing it and people might seeing your invitation 20 times and the 21st time they decide. Okay, I'll try it and then guess what? They keep coming back. So invitation is it is very important than you do it on social media. You do. You just have to figure out where people find out about events we have. Ah, there's there's a lot of opportunities that we haven't even explore. There's this website, meetup.com, that I know has worked very well for other people here in Ontario and their groups. Do go to other meditation groups in your area and just get to know the people there. That's a great opportunity to just invite people say, Oh, you know, I have this group and I don't think anyone's gonna feel like that this offended her in violation off social norm that you invite them to your own group as long as your casual about it. But that has also worked because there's a lot of groups that are really do not provide any sense of community at all. And as I mentioned, I think that's a plus that we can offer because of the fact that we do it regularly and we're an institution and we're committed to it.

Carla Long

That's really helpful, you know, and something just popped into my mind. I wonder if if someone else want to start a meditation group, maybe they go to like a yoga studio and talk to the yoga teacher and say, Hey, if you want to put this out there, this is what we do for free. If you want to go, you know, just anytime you get word of mouth out there, it's It's good stuff. Leandro, This has been really exciting to hear about I I love hearing that this is a ministry that you're offering, and especially that community support aspect. I'm really impressed by that. Well, so we're coming to the close of our podcast. You you've told us a lot. Is there something that you wish I would have asked that I didn't ask or some more advice that you have to give us or anything else that you want to say?

Leandro Palacios

Oh, well, I mean, I guess I have so many things in my mind right now because, like, really year, this has been a great opportunity. To just look into what has happened into this this journey that our congregation has been walking the last few years, and I think that one of the things that I've been learning is not only the how important in a practice that might appear on the surface so individual and private, the fact that no, that even people who are looking for this kind of spiritual practice, they also our craving community experience. So that's one thing. Another thing is like, do not be afraid of letting people know that you're a church, but there's at the beginning. We had that concern because in Toronto is not necessarily very Christian. There are other places, perhaps, but when I go to, uh, when I was a conference Independence, Missouri, that's a Christian environment, and here the picture is totally different and we were very concerned about that. And we were, uh, not not hiding it, but not leading with it. And and guess that actually doesn't matter. It's just like it's actually a positive thing to say that you're a church that is doing these kind of things and people get very impressed and they start asking about the church. They really feel like they want to learn about it because, you know, oh, that

this is a church that is doing something that I might be interested in. So what is this church about? So you know, those things we've learned little by little in this journey and also as I'm just getting to know more and more our own community and people like you and on and just Katie, who are working on this kind of ministry that are just developing this this concept and these practices of the spiritual practices that we have in Community of Christ. There's so many people out there and we can be connected. And there's a lot that we can learn from each other. And if you're about to start something, you're not alone. So ask about where I think we're all. I guess I'm not sure that you speak for everyone, but I think we're all just very willing and eager to share our experience in this journey. So, yeah, if you think that you might be considering the starting a meditation group, your congregation, it probably is that your calling? That's where the Spirit is leading you today. So don't be afraid. And just we were here to help.

Carla Long

Oh, that is awesome. Thank you for those final words, especially because I am a firm believer in what we have to force ourselves to do something. It's not the right way to go, but if you feel something calling you forward, it's pretty hard to deny that.

Leandro Palacios

Find your stuff.

Carla Long

Find your stuff, indeed, So Leandro thank you so much for being on the podcast. Thank you for sharing your expertise with us. And I know it hasn't been an easy journey the last four years, but I appreciate you sticking with it.

Leandro Palacios

Thank you. Thank you. Once again for this opportunity on it's been a wonderful so thank you so much.

Carla Long

Thanks again, Leandro.

Josh Mangelson

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