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Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 0:17

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

Robin Linkhart 0:33

Hello, and welcome to another episode of Project Zion podcast. This is your host, Robin Linkhart and today is another edition in our series, What's Brewing, where we explore how God is showing up in the neighborhood, and people of faith are living out mission and transforming ways. Today we are here with John VanDerWalker john currently serves as the mission center president of inland West mission Center. Welcome back to projects I'm podcast. JOHN, it's great to have you with us again today to talk about living out mission in today's world.

John VanDerWalker 1:16

Thank you, Robin, it's good to be here.

Robin Linkhart 1:19

For those of you who might want to get to know you better, john, I want to recommend listening to Projects Zion Podcast episode 259, where you talk about the missional use of Community of Christ campgrounds, and our rich camping traditions. John gives a really great background on himself and his life in the church and as a disciple and Minister of Jesus Christ. But today, John, I want to ask you to give us a brief update on how your mission center is living out mission in the midst of this global pandemic and shelter in place across much of the USA.

John VanDerWalker 2:04

Well, on a personal note, one of the things that I realized as I was preparing for this today was how how different life has become intentionally. I mean, how intentional we have to be about living like this morning, I showed up the grocery store at six o'clock, because that's when they open it early for people my age. And I remember years ago, talking with a friend of mine from India, who explained to me how they had water running water in their home, but they had to boil the water and be very careful about how they how they use water, how they consumed it because they would be made sick if they didn't, you know, sterilize the water first. And, and that seems so strange to me. You know, that kind of intentionality all the time, that's just what you had to do. And now I'm finding that our lives are becoming regimented. And and we have to be intentional in the things that we do, which, for me is kind of a point out how haphazard westerners have become about life. You know, if you want something to eat, you just go down to the store and get it. And they we couldn't get flour and we couldn't get beans, which I'm a southern Idaho boy. And if you don't have beans, you're almost out of food. So that's a personal learning on it on a mission center stage, I've been really impressed with the way that individuals have, have stepped up. Congregations are are trying to implement ministries in a lot of different ways through zoom worship services. through emails, one congregation is mailing out kind of a formatted worship experience for people to use in their

home, complete with a written out sermon and, you know, readings and all kinds of things for people to experience. So the emails, the phone calls, the FaceTime you know, all of the different ways that that congregations are tending the flock and making sure that the threads of the congregation are kept strong, as quite encouraging to me and it reminds me of the of the old saying that necessity is the mother of invention. While people are isolated from one another, they still find a way to come together in some way.

Robin Linkhart 4:52

Isn't that the truth and we see that playing out, as you mentioned in your own mission center in very innovative ways, particular to people's culture and context and how they understand and know their own congregation. It is a true inspiration to see the church embracing the fact that we do find ourselves in a very different context. And having this deep desire to stay connected with one another no matter what. I really appreciate the way you mentioned intentionality and how we do respond and adapt in very intentional ways. So, John, now I want to zero in on why I asked you to share again on our What's Brewing series. About seven years ago, you took on a new role in the western US a mission field, and part of that role took you on what I would call a mission adventure to Alaska. So first, I want you to tell us a little bit about what that new role looks like in the West Western field in general terms. And then I want you to tell us the story of your Alaska mission adventure.

John VanDerWalker 6:15

Well, the role was, was pretty open. I mean, it was like, I was getting opportunity to pursue pursue things that I thought were important and was also you know, a person that was that was, you know, I was, I understood that I was there to support the field officers. During that time, you were transitioning from, into a more intentional ministry with seekers, and he had been running a program for three mission centers, Discipleship Now, and so I was being mentored by you and two The new directing of the Discipleship Now, as well as I was the field coordinator for leading congregations and mission as part of that assignment. And when the the main thrust of it was a third of my time was spent in Alaska and or on Alaska ministries. And so, you know, I began to think about how how to implement that. And then finally, the last year, that assignment I also had added on to it, I became the mission center president for the Arizona mission center. So I was doing a lot of traveling a lot of the time. One of the things that I really, you know, as I kind of started to approach the the ministry and Alaska. One of the things that I've always upheld, as very important is, is understanding context. And that was strengthened in my exposure to in discipleship now, with you looking at the context and how important ministry is only accomplished when a comprehensive context is understood. So, I started looking at kind of the way I see the church and that in my podcast interview on the sacraments, I talked about, that the church is a mystery and that, that we are bound together by the Holy Spirit, and that, that, as a body of folks bound together, we are a witness of what binds us. So I approached the work in Alaska by by thinking how, how can I learn the most about this place before I ever said please set foot in the state and learn about what missional opportunity so I started studying so big a big part of my, my job was steady. In fact, three months before I ever went to Alaska, I read histories of Alaska. I took several local newspapers and read them I've got them on delivered to me every day on my, my Kindle. I read the one ads.

I read the fishing and hunting reports. I mean, I read everything about that I could about these places that I would be working. Because I wanted to know, the context. I learned a lot. I mean, I learned a lot one of the things that I learned is that a lot I had been to Alaska one time fishing and and you can say you've been to Alaska but that's really kind of a euphemism. It is such a big place and it is so diverse and culture like if you're up in Fairbanks and and you talk about Juneau as part of Alaska, they kind of look at folks Fairbanks look at Alaska is your as Juneau is a northern Seattle. I mean, it's it's such a big place and so culturally diverse. In fact, I learned that after I got up there, that in the in the metropolitan area of Anchorage, if you call Anchorage, a metropolitan area there's 365 distinct cultures in that city and It was just an incredible experience not I mean the cultures in Anchorage or native cultures, Native American cultures, and then all kinds of Asian and, and European cultures. It was it was just incredible, just incredible. But I needed to know the context in which I would be going and trying and by doing that, it helped me understand the people. One of the things I learned was that brown bears like chicken you know, and I like chicken too, but during the fall, when the bears are getting ready to go into their dens, they start raiding the backyard chicken coops in the in the surrounding areas around anchorage and it was mean it was a running, running set of stories in the newspaper every week about you know, the bear was up and such and such a place that tore in the chicken coop fishing game wants to remind you to please erect electric fences around your chicken coop so and I'm just like, holy cow. This really isn't like, where I live.

Robin Linkhart 12:27

That's different than your neighborhood Fox.

John VanDerWalker 12:30

That's right. Yeah. And I also learned and saw the pictures of what a brown bear can do to an overhead garage door. Because the guy had his dog food stored in his garage.

Robin Linkhart 12:46

Oh, my goodness.

John VanDerWalker 12:47

The really funny part was the dog food he had stored in there amounted to 1500 pounds of dog food. Because he was a musher.

Robin Linkhart 12:59

Oh, wow.

John VanDerWalker 13:00

And, and and that is not uncommon before you go into winter you lay in your, your feed for your dogs. It was hilarious that door was hanging a bit torn off of both sides and it was hanging from the automatic garage door opener link at the top sideways in the hole. It was just the picture and the bear was big enough that it left a nose print on the header above the door. So that's when he was standing on his back feet. He's he was over seven feet tall.

Robin Linkhart 13:33

This is a brown bear?

John VanDerWalker 13:34

This is a brown bear. Or or, you know you're on the coast, there's the Grizzlies and brown bears. They're kind of an inner intermix thing. And the really big ones are out on the islands. That's the thing just cracks me up anyway, so I hadn't understand the context. And the bears were a big part of the context later Later in my this It'll be the end of the bear stories. Later in my time up there, I was fishing with a friend and we were walking through the, down this trail alongside the river where the salmon were and, and he was whispering to me. And I said, Why are we whispering? And he said, so we can see the bear with me, I don't want to see the bear.

But, you know, he was pretty confident that we were going to be okay. And so, you know, I just went along with it, you know, but I was trying to be within the context.

So I, you know, I learned a lot even before I got up there. One of the things that I that I was trying, I mean when it comes to, to the methods that I used, and the method that I kind of had in my head before I started was a lot of what I did was driven by a comment And sincerity. I sincerely wanted to make a difference with the folks that I'd be working with up there. And the economy part was that at the time when I started up there flying to Alaska was really expensive. I learned quickly how to cut corners on that. But, but the expensive it drove kind of the way I operated and the way the way I operated actually was a good blend with with the idea of being sincere. I would out when I make a trip to Alaska, I would schedule at least two to three weeks in country. And and that was to that was to cut down on the cost of travel. And even though it was expensive to be there, sometimes I had to stay in a motel but a lot of times I was able to house some people Holmes, but it gave me opportunity to be with the people a couple of times in corporate worship. I was working with to two specific groups really one down around the mat, Su Valley anchorage area, and another up in Fairbanks. And which those two state, those two cities are about 380 miles apart. So it's, it's a pretty big, pretty big area. And then if you look at a map, that's just a fraction of the state of Alaska but because I was there for, you know, 14 to 20 days, I was able to spend time in people's homes I became a part of their part of their family.

I got to interview business owners kind of got a lay of the land as to how the politics work up there. Because Because of my experience with government, which I've never served in government, but my dad is a lifelong government servant. I understood you know how how the money flows in Alaska, I understood some of the back story of some of the programs that are resonant in Alaska because Interior Department was a big player in in the establishment of public lands and how those things were parceled out in the 1960s and 70s. And my dad's had friends that were engaged in that and he told me about that. So I really had a pretty good picture of, of not a complete picture, but a pretty good picture of what what was happening in Alaska. I could I could actually talk intelligently with people They're and and so kind of my method was to learn as much as I could before I ever got there. Be there as long as I could so that I could be in their lives and really see what their lives were like and and listen and then and

then and then try to make some suggestions part of the part of the Alaska experience is getting there so all all flights to Alaska go out to Seattle, I mean any serious any serious travel or will will book out of Seattle because it's the cheapest link and and it's just like flying anywhere once you get on the plane, except for if you're on the east side of the airplane going north. Well, the east side of the airplane period, you're going to have a for ordinary views, if the clouds aren't covering up the ground, I remember looking out the window on one trip. We're flying up the coast. And you could see the glaciers that were coming into the water along the coast and from the window in one spot, I could count seven glaciers and, and to me, it was just like this, this great adventure. So you get to see you get to see extraordinary scenery out the window of the plane but if you fly in at night, you might get to see the aurora borealis out your window which I also got to see. One of the things that you hear people talk about a lot and some of the legends of Alaska are the drive up and the Alaska the outcome is what they used to call it. They Alcan highway and thought if I'm going to understand you know how these people got up there the first time because none of them ever flew up there the first time. I'm going to have to drive it and so, Summer of 2013 my wife and I loaded our little pickup up with all the camping gear we had that we needed. And we took off and drove to Alaska. Is 2500 mile one way trip. took us five days we tended every night. And yes, there were bears where we were at. That was a that caused a little bit of sleeping with one eye open. And it was June so it was daylight 24 hours a day, which was interesting. But once we got up there, you know, we we started working with going to the congregations and meet with people now. By the time I had driven up there. I'd already been working up there for six months, so I wasn't the newbie. I still was choco though. I wasn't. I wasn't part of the tribe. I was I was still from outside. So it was it was an interesting trip and then and then a lot of people get to the when you leave Alaska, people ask you, you know, are you going outside or have you been outside what they mean is if you left Alaska, and to get outside, a lot of people get on the ferries and his Alaska State ferry system, and it goes to Bellingham Washington. So we decided that to get home, we would come home on the ferry. And to get to the ferry from where our last meeting with church members was in Valdez, we had drive 700 miles two Pains to get on a ferry. And that meant we had to drive into Yukon, and then back into Alaska. And it took a long day to get that 700 miles behind us. So that was all part of the contextual study. I mean, it was fun and it may sound like all fun and games, which you know, it was fun. But it was also it took a toll in my work up there. I one time, took my calendar and looked at it and added up all the days that I was home in a nine month period and if you put all the days together, it was something like five weeks or something like that if you added all the days up so I was I was gone a lot. And I don't think one of the things I learned from that experiences that I'm not going to, I'm not going to do that again, as far as being gone that much. It's hard on relationships and whatnot. So I learned a lot about Alaska. I learned a lot about myself. And I learned that some of the things that I had had thought before, weren't nearly as important as I thought they were. And we'll get into that a little bit later.

Robin Linkhart 23:28

That is a fascinating story. John, I really appreciate how you uplift the key role that understanding context, plays in mission and the intentionality that you practiced in preparing yourself before you ever even set foot in Alaska. To be with members. I mean, you went in, very well equipped in a lot of ways to understand power. The context, which in my experience, just

heightens our capacity to be able to fully authentically be present with the people and be able to listen deeply as we share together.

John VanDerWalker 24:13

You know, one of the greatest compliments I got that first year that I was working up there, as we had, and you were on these calls. We had these conference calls where we would kind of do an assessment of what the work, how the work was going. And I, I got an idea I who said this, but I'm not positive. But one of the one of the folks in Alaska, which is the greatest compliment I've ever had said, it's very clear that John has done his homework. And for me, that just validated that that all the work that I had put into trying to understand the state. I read a history of Alaska. And I came to understand how Alaskans think because of the way the federal government treats Alaska, the name of the book was an American colony. And when you think about, you know, most of Alaska is owned by the United States government, which I am totally in favor of. But the fact is that the federal government administers that land and the people that live there feel like they're, they're being, you know, run by an exterior power that they don't really have any control over. I don't know that I agree with that. That completely but by reading that history, written from that perspective by an Alaskan professor in the university, of Alaska Anchorage, I actually called the professor and talked to him on the phone. And, you know, I asked him some things, you know, pointed things about are there, you know, are there things that you can think of that I need to be engaged in? Or that I need to go, you know, meet somebody or, or investigate something. And so, by doing that, and having then later having it's clear that John's done his homework, for me really does lift up the importance of knowing your context, or at least being open to understanding the context before you ever get there.

Robin Linkhart 26:41

And it says volumes to people, the people that were called to serve and Minister with because the intentionality of that action, the discipline and practice that goes with, with doing that speaks volumes to people that they mean something to you that this ministry is valuable and worthwhile and that you want to do whatever it takes to really deeply understand them, which means their story that's connected to generations of story. That's that's a life changing experience for someone to have a minister come and invest in them in that way, I think. Yeah, that's, that's the real deal. And it makes a huge difference.

John VanDerWalker 27:32

Another thing that I read once I got up there was it was a written by a psychologist from one of the universities and it was about why people go to Alaska moved to Alaska, and then most of it had to do with either lack of relationship outside or broken relationships. And I think it was a study of I got the book up on the shelf, but I think it was a study like five Different people that this person had interviewed and spent, like, a year or a year and a half studying, and then wrote this book about, you know why people go to Alaska. A lot of people go up there to get away from something. And because I read that book, kind of midway through my experience up there, I was beginning to see some of those stories that were in that book and some of the people that I was meeting in Alaska, and not not that I was, you know, saying these are all

exactly the same, but I could understand, you know, why would somebody go someplace where for, you know, three months out of the year, it's dark, and it's cold. I mean, serious.

Robin Linkhart 28:49

It is serious cold. Yeah, my family actually lived in Anchorage, Alaska for two and a half years when I was very young. My earliest memories are from Alaska. And when Alaska became part of my fields and I, and I went there, as a minister, I met a woman who had been my babysitter when she was in high school.

No, that's cool.

It was fun to reconnect.

John VanDerWalker 29:18

Yeah, that's cool.

Robin Linkhart 29:20

But I digress here.

John VanDerWalker 29:22

One of the things is just interesting that the anchorage airport is the only airport I ever landed at, where you could roll to a stop in a 737.

I mean, that runway is so long and so wide. It's uphill. Wow. You've never, I mean, it's like yeah, let's see the brakes on this one guys.

Robin Linkhart 29:45

So let's jump into your ministry with the folks in Alaska. In general terms, I want you to talk about how you witnessed the transformation of lives and communities during that time. How how the people of the church engaged in deepening awareness of mission, their own mission context and how they could be part of being the church of today and tomorrow.

John VanDerWalker 30:17

So one of the things that I discovered while I was while I was working up there, and after, after I got on the ground, and spent some time in Alaska, I began to realize that and I kind of suspected this before, because I had served as a mission center president and worked with congregations throughout the western United States and some Midwest congregations. That people that live in a in a community sometimes don't really understand their own context. They don't they don't they they kind of everybody has their own interests and their own life and their business and where their jobs, whatever it is, as they become very kind of isolated within a community, especially the church people. I mean, a lot of folks that are in business, you know, they'll have connections with the Rotary Club and some other things that kind of give them a bigger picture. But a lot of folks just, you know, they work their jobs, they go home, they have their families and they go to church, and they don't really understand everything that's going on

around them. One of the things I discovered was that I needed to be trying to, to discover I needed to be trying to, I guess, ferret out what was happening in the communities that the, the congregations lived in. And I have a guy, I got to meet some really amazing people. I met a gentleman who was a pastor and he was actually the pastor of the building of the church that owned the building that we rented in in the Mat Su Valley. And he had started a public radio station, a community FM radio station to play jazz music mostly. But it also had gave people opportunity to come in and kind of air out their their stuff. And it was all, you know, controlled. It wasn't anything nasty or anything, but it was it was a true public thing. Well come to find out that this guy retired and went to less than was best, I think Howard best and he'd retired and couldn't go to church anymore. In in the town where he had pastored because it was mandated by their denomination that he couldn't. So he moved anchorage and he got to Anchorage and he could go to his own denomination there because they wouldn't accept gay, gay people.

And I came to find out that he was a pioneer in the Mat Su Valley to have an open congregation welcoming congregation. And in that he had been engaged with the reproductive rights movement in Alaska, when the governor imposed strict regulations on the community hospital there in the Mat Su valley that would not provide for women's complete women's health care. He and some people got together and sued the governor and went and went to the Supreme Court. One. Wow. And I got to have coffee with this guy and he was anxious and excited to have coffee. I mean, I'm like, in the presence of a rock star. And so, these people knew Howard. But they didn't really know everything about Howard and and the things that he had accomplished. So, you know, I thought it was pretty cool that we had hitched our wagon to a congregation because we were using their building on Sunday afternoon. That was so progressive and really lifted up a lot of the principles that the Community of Christ lifts up.

Robin Linkhart 34:46
Exactly.

John VanDerWalker 34:48
And, and I also I got to interview a woman who had started a a service services for homeless teenagers home homelessness in Alaska is a critical issue. And I mean critical in the in the sense that it's deadly because of the severity of the environment up there. Summer times are nice unless the mosquitoes are bad then you might get killed by mosquitoes

Robin Linkhart 35:21
They're the size of hummingbirds.

John VanDerWalker 35:24
The other Hummingbird McGrath Alaska has Welcome to McGrath t shirt you can buy this got this Hummingbird sitting on this corpse. The hummingbirds as big as the guy. So anyway or not the hummingbird but the mosquito.

Robin Linkhart 35:41

Yeah.

John VanDerWalker 35:42

Anyway, so this person started this this services service center for homeless youth and it's called my house and I asked her why you named Well, kids, you know are going to school and and when they say once one of their friends is well where do you live, they can say my house and it won't bring up any kind of negative stuff, they can just kind of pass over it real fast and not have to admit that they're homeless or whatever. She did some she did some research and she in her master's studies and learned that Rhodes, she researched the Rhodes Scholars and kind of tried to find the things that kind of made Rhodes Scholars or Rhodes Scholars have in common. And she found out one of them was like 94% of them have a meal had a meal every day at a table with their family, one meal a day at their table, with their family and, or with adults. And so she thought that That that was a key finding. A meal at a table in conversation. Of course, that's right up the alley for Community of Christ, you know, the 9th sacrament is potluck. And, and I I got to finding out that her services for youth, if you're going to be involved in her programs you'd have to commit to be there every day for meal with adults at a table. And and I says, Well, how can how can Community of Christ help with this? Well, we need clothes for interviews, you know, one of the things they needed was clothes, like button down shirts and slacks and that kind of thing so they could go on interviews. So I put that out to the congregation and they delivered, they came up with clothes. What else we really need adults to sit at tables and have a meal with these kids. And church people are absolutely the right people, especially if they're, you know, compassionate, which our folks generally are. And so nobody knew this was going on that this service was going I was happening and so I I kept working with her and I said, Well, what what else? Well, we we really need to be able to get these kids showered for their job interviews and that kind of thing. And so I just mentioned that to the congregation one of the young adults there, took a hold of that and and started calling up all the Alaska during the summer you can go to an RV park or a campground and and buy a shower there about eight bucks. And are they weren't that time and, you know, that was too expensive and and These, these, most of these business owners did not want to have that homeless youth come in there. Well, this, this young adult from the Community of Christ kept looking around and she finally went to the Recreation Center, which the sewer which the the governor who had been sued by Howard, built as a hockey venue for their her kids when she was mayor. It's a very, very nice facility. I've been in it for some sportsman shows and stuff, but so our young adult went to there and said, You know, this is what we're trying to do. And this is why we're trying to help my house. We're trying to get a place where these kids can have showers and we want to pay for Well, the the director of the recreation center says well, you really don't need to pay for it. You know she our member was very adamant said yeah, we do we really do we want skin in this thing, you know? Those weren't her words, but that's what she was getting at. Well, how about \$1 \$1? shower? Um, that's a deal. Okay, so what what do we need to provide? Make sure that when they show up for a shower, what do we need to provide? She says, Well, nothing. We got towels and their soap in the showers and all this stuff. So this community rec center agreed to have us print up cards that were laminated, and that my house could hand out to the youth. And the youth could take to the Rec Center and hand in for a shower. And then every month we go down and gather up the used cards, bring them back to my house. So it was

just this and then we would pay The rec center for how many showers were used. And it was a great thing. I mean it just it, you know, it's one of those words of all persons things these kids who are either thrown out by their parents or have gotten into a place where they can't, they can't really function in their homes anymore. Or maybe their parents have lost their home and they're just cruising couches. These these kids are given a sense of self worth just by buying them a \$1 shower. And it was it was just a really, really cool thing to be able to be a part of that. And because of that the congregation started looking in some other areas that they could help they found a soup kitchen and anchorage that they went and volunteered at and i i was there to help in the in the soup kitchen one time and the dirty Hector came over and grabbed me says, Look, they, they tell me you're the you're the big honcho here. And I said, Well, not really. I'm just up here. And he's alone want you to know that I love it when Community of Christ comes here, because your people really know how to work, and they get a lot done. And there's not a whole lot of goofing off. But the conversation is really good. And I thought, Man, what a great compliment, you know, that our people have got this reputation and they hadn't been there that much. But they had made a real well, when we showed up that one day I think we had 15 people that were okay. And that was pretty incredible too. Because when I started working with that congregation, there were four people coming together.

And and I just got lists of people and started calling folks and going of their homes. I remember a friend of mine up in Fairbanks, one time asked me, john, what is it exactly that you do when you're up here and this is after I'd been dropping into his store for two years, and we'd become pretty good friends and, and he says, What is exactly you do when you're up here? I says, Well, you know, I go to people's houses, I eat their food, and I sleep in their house. And he looked at me like, man, I want a job like that. But the reality was, I had I had spent time in their lives and understood, you know, about them. And then I began to hear their stories and connect those stories with other stories. And I began to weave my own story into those stories. And we began to create kind of a fabric of stories. And then people were reminded of why they loved each other and they began to come back together. So it was it was a great, it was a great experience of community and how just being intentionally engaged with people can really help them reestablish connection. So we went from four to about a couple of dozen within about a year and a half. That were meeting now I didn't, nobody was converted, and I really don't like that language. But there were people who began to come into fellowship because of the the increased activity of the congregation with each other. I remember one time this congregation had decided that every every month they were going to have one fun Sunday where they didn't preach and sing songs and they did eat and they prayed together, but they went out and played. And the one time was we were we were sled, and I'm telling you, this is the most amazing sled Hill I've ever seen. You only need to get when you're up and that Fairbanks or not Fairbank but Mat Su Valley area, you only need to go up about 2000 feet and you're above treeline which is, you know, Colorado it's about 10,000.

Robin Linkhart 45:15
Right.

John VanDerWalker 45:17

The reason is because the you know, it's the days are so short and the wintertime. So we went up to the ski hill and if you turned at the bottom of the ski hill, 14 miles later you'd end up in town. I mean, it was it was most secret. I was almost scared to go down that hill because I thought if I don't get this thing stopped, I'm not gonna stop for an hour. But after we got to sled and it was a great fun day of sledding, we went down to a restaurant to eat together and we were all in this one room around this table. It was set up for And whereas there's enough of us that they had to really kind of Jerry rigged the tables together. I was sitting on a corner. And I was listening to these conversations. And I mean, there were a lot of them. There was a conversation about starting a young peacemakers club. And there was a conversation between a man and a young family that had just moved to Alaska. And they were trying to figure out how to make their way in Alaska. And he was trying to give them pointers and tips. And there was conversations about the wreck, so and so had on this on the sledding mountain, and the kids were kidding with each other. And so all of this was just going on, it was this cacophony of sound in in this room, and I'm sitting back, just look at it. This is so happy to see all of this going on. And the Spirit just rested on me in a very powerful way and said, this is the kingdom of God. This is this is this is the inflection point of the vision and I Thought Holy cow, what a What a great privilege to be a part of this. And, you know, really all I did was just go to people's houses, eat their food and sleep in their extra bed. I mean, that's basically all I did.

Robin Linkhart 47:17

Well, there's a, there's a lot more happening in the midst of that the intentionality of presidents investing in people's lives creating safe space for people to share some of their deepest stories. That creates, that creates a context where amazing things happen and I believe it opens ourselves individually and collectively to the movement of the Holy Spirit in ways that effect transformation and new life. I love this phrase that you shared. They're reminded why they love each other. That is so powerful. Thank you so much for that, John. So you've talked a little bit about the change that you've witnessed in community. As people were reminded why they love each other, as they began to respond to the spirit moving in new ways, more people coming together, the way they decided to take one Sunday a month and have it be a fun time together and yet they still pray together and eat together. And thank goodness, everybody survived the sled trip. So tell us and you've already touched on this a little bit, but from my experience. When I am investing myself in mission and ministry, it changes me every bit as much as it changes in What else and understanding that I'm not the one that is changing others, it's the Holy Spirit working in and through and among us that affects that change. How did this experience change you?

John VanDerWalker 49:15

Well, I mentioned before, there were things that I, that I thought were pretty important that I soon discovered, weren't terribly important the luxuries of dedicated space we are so accustomed to in the Western world we're so accustomed to having, having church buildings and that are dedicated to, you know, worship and fellowship. I learned that that's not necessarily what we need. They are nice to have and if they are used properly, they can be a huge benefit to the larger community, but I learned you know, that, that those things really are luxuries. And and we need to be, we need to be thankful for those luxuries. I shared in our

earlier podcast about a communion service that I've been a part of on the banks of the Kasilof river, on the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska. And, and that was one of those times that I learned it was just really pointed out to me that this, this moment of high worship was not dependent upon, you know, having a nice oak communion table, that says, Do this in remembrance of me. It was it was the dedication of the people to one another, and a willingness to be vulnerable to each other.

Some of the most profound experiences of the Holy Spirit I had in Alaska. We're at people's dining room tables and in their living room sitting on the couch. I remember one person said that she really didn't have any interest in being reengaged in the church. Because she had been hurt so badly by some of the things that have happened in our congregation. I learned in that in that experience, that it's absolutely essential that that we take responsibility for the wrongs that institutions do. We may have the policies and all the things that we we really find to be important. And what then they're there for a reason. Don't Don't dismiss that at all. But when, when they're either used incorrectly or, or they're abused, somebody needs to come in and say we were wrong. In that, and and I found out that being able to go in there and and because I felt like I had the authority and the permission to do it, I I took responsibility for those wrongs and then tried to heal the wound that they had caused. Not that I was doing any of the healing, but I was trying to provide a way for them to find healing. And I remember this same person who said they really didn't have any interest in being a part of the church again. About a year later in a conference call saying that she had been given her church back that by accepting you know, the responsibility and helping her to find a way and her family over find a way back was, was important. So one of the things that that I learned is that, that, you know, taking responsibility is important. And that's not anything that, you know, I didn't know and that the church doesn't teach. It's just that sometimes you just have to really step up and and do the things that are hard to do.

Some of the other things I learned was that the stories are just extremely important. You know, these podcasts are are a way for people to share their stories and make connections with others. By listening to the stories of the folks and then going to another person's home and listening to their story, and then say, Oh, yeah, I was just talking to so and so and they were mentioning something about this person can you tell me more? And so now the person that I had talked to previously and the person I was talking to now are connected. And, and oh yes, they were there for that. Or I remember them telling me, you know, so that you could make these you can make these connections through story. And I am a storyteller. I mean, I can spin a yarn and I can reel you right into the top guy to the rod. If we're going to use a fishing metaphor, in fact, that's one of the funnest things I do is to tell a tall tale. But these these stories are powerful. And I remember, I learned, I learned, you know, prior to my time in Alaska, at my friend's table, John and JoAnn Fisher's table that those places are places of Holy Communion. And I remember dining room tables where tears were flowing in Alaska where the stories of dedication and faithfulness were just so powerful and we're brand new again. I mean it was like, I am so happy that I can tell this story to someone else that hasn't heard it. And then it becomes new in that person's life again. So the power of story was was one of the things that I that I really come to appreciate up there. It it changed me a lot for a lot of things appreciation

of the luxury that I have appreciation a life and death. In the wintertime, especially up there if especially if you're in the interior where people are a little bit more scares, you're you're in a car driving down the road, you're only 10 minutes from being dead at any moment. And that's not from a car accident. I mean, your car can stop. And if it's 40 below zero, you're not gonna last very long if you don't have the correct stuff, and I've been in 40 below zero, so I know how cold that is. I remember one time I was in Anchorage and I rented, you know if you're going to be there in a wetter and that was part of like actual things, too. I was not going to just be a fair weather. fair weather missionary in Alaska. I was going to be there during the brutal parts of it, too. I was there for the shortest day of the year. I know what that's like in Fairbanks, and it's short, it's like two hours, three hours of sun above the horizon. But I remember I had rented a car and I wanted an all wheel drive. Because it was January, and you need an all wheel drive in January. Yeah. And I get there and they give me this little Chevy front wheel drive compact car because that's all they had left and I'm going this is not good. Well, it snowed 17 inches the next day.

Robin Linkhart 57:17

Oh my goodness.

John VanDerWalker 57:18

I had, you know, I'm not gonna let because I'm in Alaska for crying out loud. If you're in Alaska, you better just deal with the snow. Everybody else was going to work I better go to work too. So I'm trying to make appointments. And in that day, I planted that car in the snow in the middle of the street three times. I was going up and down the street knocking on doors asking for shovel to dig my car out. And one time this Native American kid rolled up in his in his Chevy pickup four wheel drive. And, and he says, well, let's get you out of here. I said, Okay, thanks, man. I really appreciate it. And he's As well, you know, up here, we've all had this happen to us. Well, I haven't because I drive this thing but, you know, so so he ties on to me. And he starts and he plants his truck. So, so here's a Chevy truck tied to a little Chevy car and we're both stuck in the middle of the street. And we're kind of, you know, cussing our bad luck. And this guy drives up in a Dodge. Well, if you're a Chevy guy, which I happen to be a Chevy guy, you know, a Dodge just kind of okay. He too can help but so he hooks onto the Chevy and the Chevy is hooked on to me. And the three of us are making this parade out of the snowbank and, and that's just the way it is. I mean, if if there's a car stopped along the side of the road, you do not go by it. It doesn't matter what time of year. It is. You stop because you need to help. So that that kind of intentionality that was one of the things that, you know, to be really aware of your surroundings and the people around you and what's happening. That was that was, you know, really brought home to me. So as changed, I was changing a lot of ways. It was it was a really wonderful experience with people but it was also a lot of hard work.

Robin Linkhart 59:32

Yeah, I hear ya. You shared some really deeply meaningful things with us done as you talk about how this experience changed you. How has that changed how you approach mission today?

John VanDerWalker 59:51

Well, taking on this, this position of mission center president last November One of the things that I committed to do is not not saying anything for six months just to try to go and listen now this quarantine has kind of curtailed that, my plan. But that's one of the things that I, that I learned is that I don't have all the answers. In fact, I may not have any of the answers because I don't know what the questions are. So the best thing for me to do is just be quiet and listen to people and then see how their stories are percolating and how I can discern from what I'm hearing a direction for congregations to go and, and how mission can be approached. I also learned that there's just some congregations just are not going to engage mission. Now it's just, they they're into what they're doing. And that's, that's it. They want well, sometimes they just need a little bit of inspiration and, and helping to point out opportunities and which is what I was able to do in Alaska to a small degree.

And I found out that little things make a really big difference, like going and sitting at a table and eating with a homeless kid. It's it doesn't have to be a big thing. I also learned that the mission initiative invite people to Christ is a lot of times over overcomplicated because of the way I think about a church as being a bound community is bound by the Holy Spirit. And as Paul The Apostle and letter writer says, you know, we are the body of Christ. When we invite somebody into come into community with us or into even relationship with me as an individual, I'm inviting someone into relationship with Christ. And of course, that puts the onus on me to behave in such a way that is Christ like, but it also frees me to be me in Christ to that person. So just make a friend. I have a friend from high school, who I have not seen face to face for probably 10 years, we still text each other and talk to each other on the phone. And I'm his, I'm his minister. So I think that you know, one of the most profound things that I've learned is that being engaged in mission as individuals, you don't have to have, you know, all the bells and whistles. A lot of those bells and whistles are really nice. But you have to be committed, and you have to know what you're committed to. So, for me, mission is not nearly as complicated as it used to be. It's not nearly as expensive as it once was, in my mind. And I think that I mean, I know of groups that are meeting right now that are engaged in mission and their activity is to get together and have coffee and talk about what's going on in their lives is ministry to one another, but it's ministry in such a way that they feel free to invite other people to come and be healed. Mm hmm. I was engaged with a group like that in the in the early 2000s. In Ohio, where, you know, our purpose was to heal one guy. Mm hmm. And we had dinner and we talked and pretty soon by the time we were done with that, by the time that group kind of disbanded, two and a half years later, we had over 30 people. It comes through there and at various stages of brokenness and we're able to experience healing. So mission is is more about for me, mission is more about friendship and giving people an opportunity to engage Christ that is in you.

Robin Linkhart 1:04:46

People are hungry, they're deeply hungry for our authentic relationship. And they're deeply longing for a safe space to be who they are to be more Matt exactly where they are with the no condition of being other than they are, and to be able to share their their real story. And I'm with you, John creating the space for that to happen, which basically means we show up as real and vulnerable as we can be. And we listen as deeply as we possibly can.

John VanDerWalker 1:05:25

And you know, that was that was like the powerful lesson of discipleship now, all those folks that went through that came out of the other end of that is formed as disciples in such a way that they understood just what you just said. And the authentic authenticity thing is a big a big thing. I'm a sportsman. So sending me up to Alaska was like not only a dream come true for me, but it was also a way for me to connect with people. Now, a lot of people think that, you know, the church paid for three years of fishing for me, but that's not the case. I did do some fishing all up there, but I, I worked a whole lot more than I ever fished. And it's not 59 to 40 or 51 to 49%. I did. I didn't, but I had that understanding of the culture. People don't go to Alaska to sit in office, or most of them don't. Most of them go up there because of the outdoors. And, and you know, because I'm interested in that and I am proficient at certain aspects of, you know, outdoor activity. I had a natural in, so don't be afraid to. Don't be afraid to capitalize on that. I remember once, I was at a reunion in southern Ohio, and Grant MacMurray was there and we were walking across the lawn, and a guy walks past towards us and he says, Hello, President McMurray, Hey John, how's fishing? And you know, I said, well, you haven't been for a while or whatever my response was, and we get past the guy Grant puts his hand on my shoulder. He says, Well, it looks like we sent the right guy here. But, you know, the interest that you have are important. Yeah.

Robin Linkhart 1:07:25

Yeah. And I always say, when we intersect our deep sense of call and response to the Holy Spirit, with those things in our life that naturally make our heart sing. That is when we're working in the holy rhythms of life and discipleship, and ministry. So being in tune with who we are and allowing that to connect naturally with people. That's a gift and that's an awareness and this kind of gets into my next question, because I'm sure we have listeners thinking, well, how can I do something like this? Where I live, where I live, I'm not going to move to Alaska or someplace else I need to be able to respond and do some of the things I hear John talking about in my congregation or my mission center. And you've been really good John at kind of teasing out some principles, etc, as you've gone along, but are there any other things that you might lift up or articulate in a different way? Guiding questions or tips that you can share to help folks begin to explore the possibilities that might be right outside their door, like you said, in the Mat, Su Valley, it was like they lived in that community, but they weren't necessarily looking at the broader context outside of the national daily rhythms of their life.

John VanDerWalker 1:08:55

So you know, what one of the things that we talked about missional theology is is the willingness to risk and and you know, we usually think about risk and ways of of yeah we're going to risk this money or we're going to risk this resource or we're going to risk getting our feelings hurt. I guess one thing because we are such a production oriented culture which is to me is becoming a false god or it is a false god be willing to waste some time and and risk that you're going to waste time. You know, I chased a lot of rabbits and when I was in Alaska, and the rabbits up there big and wide during the winter, but you know, the the chasing, you might chase something and it will not pan out, but be willing to risk that, be willing to pursue a

friendship was Somebody and then have it not work where the connections aren't made, be willing to risk being vulnerable and sharing your story with someone this friend of mine in Alaska that's he got me started on a hobby that I'd never even imagined that I would do. And, you know, he kept saying, John, I want to go fishing. In fact, let's let's take fly into this place and we'll put the boat in the river and we'll float down the river for three days and it'll be a great trip. And you know, that he was being vulnerable to me. I mean, he we had not, I have a saying if you really want to know somebody spend three days in Fish Camp with him. You know, if they do the dishes, and if they, you know, clean up after themselves and they, you know, help carry the stuff up the bank and all that kind of stuff then you know you got a good fishing partner and somebody you can live with. But Mark didn't know me very well, but he was willing to risk and that taught me a lot. He risked how we did eventually get to float a river, it was a one day float. And, and in that, I think he learned something about me too, because the river had been blown out by rainstorm, and we weren't catching any fish. And, and yet, we had a blast and I've got some video of us fishing, and we had so much fun floating that river in the rain, you know, and not catching fish. So, you know, be vulnerable, be willing to risk wasting time and be willing to willing to risk being vulnerable.

For me, that's that's kind of the key. And then, and then understand your context, you know, get into get into the community. Something that you like to do, somebody else probably likes to do that to find that group of people. I remember way back, a friend of mine got engaged with a club, he became the pastor of that club. And it was not a religious club. I mean, it was, it was an outdoor club, and he became the pastor every, they had a prayer for every meeting, and he was the guy that did it. And they had never had that before.

Robin Linkhart 1:12:33

I love that. I love that. So John, we're gonna widen this out just a little bit and I want to ask you what, what are the hopes that you have for Community of Christ going into the future?

John VanDerWalker 1:12:51

Well, you know, in this time of pandemic and we are dependent upon the technology. Yeah, I'm looking forward to things getting back to normal with the full understanding that there never will be. I mean, it's even, I've got a degree in history. So know a little bit about how things have worked in the United States for the last 300 years or 200 years. After these kinds of things, there's a new normal emerges. I hope that for the Community of Christ, that as we emerge from this, that we're able to have a healthy blend of technology and, and personal interaction. That some of the things that we and we and we're being forced, we're being forced by forces outside of ourselves to do aside about the things that are important to us some of those luxuries that I talked about, you know, had to do with church buildings and things like that, you know, we're being forced to make some of those decisions right now. And we need to honor the people that have worked so hard to, to develop the church as it is not only facility wise, but theologically, historically, we need to we need to honor all of that, but we still need to continue to winnow the things that are important, grab the kernels, and use the chaff to hold whatever it is that it needs to hold together. That's, that's not what we're going to eat but we might build use it for something else. So, you know, my hope is that, as we are forced to stop right now,

and some of are able to stop more than others I understand. But think about, you know, how is how is the church going to look and how how, what is it that's really important to us and I'm imagining this time of isolation is probably helping people really discover what's really important. I mean, I've heard people say, All I want to do is give somebody a hug. And and I saw my grandkids on Easter morning from a distance. And I just wanted to hug them so bad. And I know that's the way it is a congregations back I was in an email conversation with a congregant yesterday. And she says, Well, we could do, we could do an email thing out, but yeah, I really love seeing the faces of the folks on zoom. And so you know, as far as I'm concerned is the decision right there. We're going to, we're going to stay with Zoom worship services. So I I hope that we can, in our time away from each other, we can really decide what's important. And there's, there's some of the stuff that's nice to have, but it's not essential. And, and I know we've been in this process for 20 years. I mean, I was part of it for a long time. So just to become authentic, again for 21st century church.

Robin Linkhart 1:16:29

Yeah. So we have covered a lot of grounds, literally and figuratively during this conversation, john, is there anything you want to say that I did not ask you about?

John VanDerWalker 1:16:49

Not that I can think of. I pretty much used up all the air.

Robin Linkhart 1:16:56

Well, John, I want to thank you for being with us today. And for helping us remember why we love each other, and why we follow the one whose name we proclaim Jesus Christ. And doing that in a way that draws us into parts of the story of your life and the stories of others lives that you have connected with so deeply and so authentically. And a very special thanks to all of our listeners. If you would like to hear more stories about mission check out our what's brewing series. If you have questions for our guest, John VanDerWalker, you can email him at jvanderwalker@cofchrist.org. You can also look for other podcasts from John in the search box on our website this is your host Robin Linkhart and you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. See you again soon. Bye Bye.

Josh Mangelson 1:18:21

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