

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.

Brittany Mangelson 0:33

Hello, everyone, welcome to another episode of the Project Zion podcast. This is Brittany Mangelson. And I will be your host for today's episode and I'm actually really excited about the conversation we're going to have today. It is going to be part of our steamers and sodas series which is all about children's ministry in Community of Christ. And I am joined by several ministers from the Mid Atlantic mission center, who have been doing children's ministry online. And I was thinking that they started when COVID heads and it turns out that they started actually earlier this year, I think in January. So I'm really excited because the church has migrated to the internet. I know that a lot of congregations and mission centers and house churches have wondered what to do about the kids. And it's just how to how to migrate church on to zoom has been an interesting, an ongoing conversation. So I have 12345 ministers who have been doing it for now six months, and so I'm really excited to introduce you to Meredith Carr, Jim Shaffer, and Shaffer, Joanna Wardrop and Erin Cook. So, we are just going to go through and give introductions to all of you. And so let us know who you are, where you live, and then how you're involved. In the congregation or your mission center, and then maybe just an interesting fact about you. So who wants to go first?

Ann Shaffer 2:09

I can go first. I'm Ann Shaffer, and I'm from the Gatchelville congregation in Pennsylvania, so South Central Pennsylvania, and a fun fact about me. I teach fourth grade. But I also know how to juggle. So my fourth graders love that when I do that in class for fun.

Jim Shaffer 2:29

I'm Jim Schaefer. I'm also from the Gatchelville congregation. And he and I both live in New York, Pennsylvania, which is about 30 minutes north of Baltimore. I also teach for living and so I've actually been teaching online with high school aged students for the last four to five years. So I feel like I have some experience there that's helped to kind of shape the way that we've done things in an online environment. And interesting fact. I cannot juggle so that that doesn't help. I don't know what's what's interesting about me I got nothing.

Ann Shaffer 3:00

You play the guitar,

Jim Shaffer 3:02

I play the guitar. Let me say that interesting fact about me. I do play the guitar. I also function as a worship leader when we're face to face at Gatchelville and also after your park during the summers at our church camps.

Brittany Mangelson 3:15

Awesome. Thank you so much. Who's next?

Meredith Carr 3:20

My name is Meredith Carr and I live in Ridings Maryland. I attend the wilmington delaware congregation, and I am the invitationals support Minister for the Mid Atlantic mission center. Interesting fact about me. I joined this church in 2016. So not all that long ago.

Brittany Mangelson 3:43

Thanks, Meredith.

Erin Hook 3:45

I'm Erin Hook, and I'm so excited to be here. Thanks for the invitation. I belong to the wilmington delaware congregation with Meredith and I'm from Newark, Delaware. I homeschool our to children, and I was really having a hard time finding something interesting about me. But um, we recently, over the past few years started camping trying to go to as many national parks as we can. So that's what I like to do.

Joanna Wardrop 4:21

Hi, my name is Joanna wardrop. I'm go to the Woodbury congregation in Woodbury, which is in southern New Jersey. In my church, I work with the children. I'm also a member of the children and youth ministry team for the Mid Atlantic mission center. And the fun fact I could think of, which kind of makes me feel old is I have actually been working with the children in our church and mission center for 31 years.

Brittany Mangelson 4:51

Wow, that I absolutely love the seasoned ministry that is coming to this group and just the general working with children, whether it be homeschooling, or a public school teacher, being able to really bring your giftedness that you do outside of church, and then also bring it into church. So I think that this is going to be the best group of people to have this conversation. So thank you all for being here today. So the first question I was going to ask everybody is simply what did children's ministry look like before COVID. But now, like I said, I realized that you all have been doing children's ministry online since January. So I guess I'm curious, what sparked the desire to bring children's ministry online before COVID? Y'all were pretty prophetic in that so can somebody speak to that? And just let us know you know, why? Why was there the drive to move children's ministry online in the first place?

Meredith Carr 6:00

So Erin and her two children, Hannah and Noah started attending our congregation in 2018. And they had I know our were the only two children in our entire congregation. And and they were the first kids that we've had in a very long time. So we didn't have really a children Sunday school kind of in place. We did, you know, develop a program, but Hannah, Noah were the only two children in the program. And after a reunion last year, where Erin, Hannah, and Noah came

up and the kids had a chance to meet the other kids in the mission center. And it was just such a great week. We started to think about how can we keep the kids connected? How can we help Hannah Noah, have a Sunday school experience that's more I don't know more meaningful is not really the right word. But you know, a way they can stay connected with the friendships that they made at camp. And turns out the kids were already one line talking and doing things and staying connected. And I just thought, when we were trying to decide what we could do, I thought, how can we bring in an element of church into this online connection? And that's when I thought, what if we did online, Sunday school? So when we first started, the kids were actually logging on from the congregation so so that they could be connected with their friends and Gatchelville has. They had an amazing Vacation Bible School and Sunday school program kind of already in place. So I approached them about what they be interested in kind of hosting the Sunday school. And they were so receptive to it. I mean, really, I got such a positive response from them. They were excited. And Ann and Jim kind of took the idea and, and ran with it. Our our first class was in January. And we've learned a lot from that. But it's been, it's been a wonderful experience, I think for the kids.

Ann Shaffer 8:29

Yeah, thank you, Meredith, for starting that because that was I mean, it was really neat for my kids to be able to make those connections with kids that they had been to camp with. And then they got excited about every Sunday, I get to see friends I don't always get to see. Usually it was just two or three times a year when we'd come to missions and our activities, whether it was you know, at our campgrounds or just mission center activities, but now they're getting to see them quite often. So that was a really nice connection.

Jim Shaffer 8:56

I think the other thing to kind of note is we definitely originally started off Just with Wilmington and Gatchelville, but even in late January, early February, we were extending that out to other congregations. Like I know blooms, the Bloomsburg congregation and our mission center had joined in for one or two of those opportunities. And so we found that a lot of our congregations were kind of in the same boat that Wilmington was in on that they had, you know, one person or two people that were running the Sunday school and we're struggling to kind of keep that together and stay motivated and keep, like some sort of consistency there. And so those connections, you know, didn't just extend even early on to just gacha Ville and Wilmington, but really extended out throughout throughout the whole mission center.

Erin Hook 9:39

We're also new members of Community of Christ, we joined in January of 2019. So um, prior to that, I was like, investigating other churches and we attended a church for a while and they had a really thorough riving children's religious education program, and my daughter is 12 was really upset to leave her friends behind. And she was also disappointed when I found finally found a church that I felt like was our spiritual home. And that was a hard thing for me to experience her sadness for not having people, her peers that she connected with because, you know, they weren't there with her. So, having gone to reunion and being able to meet other children within our faith tradition, she was really excited. She really made some connections

and she and Noah asked to go to Gatchelville? Can we go to Gatchelville, it's only an hour away. But you know, to do that on a weekly and bi weekly, it was just too much for me to be able to do so. It was really nice because, like, just being able to talk about it freely and feel like I wasn't. I loved the children's program that our church offers. I think the curriculum is wonderful. And I think it's great that Meredith was, like, listening to what I was saying. And she was just so open and thoughtful about meeting the kids spiritual needs. So I'm really grateful that everyone's worked together to offer that to them. And I know that families elsewhere are probably experiencing the same thing. And it's just, it's really exciting. And it really, I think helps my children feel like, like the church really values them. I make these opportunities available.

Joanna Wardrop 11:53

I actually wasn't involved in the Sunday school class at the beginning of my children, which Get their Sunday school. I'm at the Woodbury congregation. But when COVID hit, and we were scrambling to try to find something for these kids, I was told about the the online resume, Sunday school and my girls, we tried it and they loved it, you know, immediately the same thing what Ann was saying, because they got to see the friends that they don't really get to see too often. So so I'm a little bit later coming to the party, but we've really gotten a lot out of out of it. And it doesn't make you feel so isolated and alone when your social distancing.

Brittany Mangelson 12:39

I really appreciate when I hear all of you talk, you are identifying issues that many ministers and Community of Christ have post camp or post a big event, you know, how do we keep these kids connected? When we go to a mission center conference, or when we go to World Conference or when we go to reunion and then we all go back to our congregations and I think This is a conversation that ministers have been happening Well, probably since the very beginning of our church. But you all actually did something about it. And then it turned out to be a massive blessing because of COVID. So I just really, really appreciate that. You didn't let the this question that hangs over so many people's heads of like, oh, how do we keep these kids connected? You didn't leave it at a question you actually did something about it, to me is really inspiring. It just shows a lot of intentionality. And I think it was Aaron that said that it helps make her kids feel like the church cares about them. And I get that sense too. Because again, you actually did something about the question that plagues so many of our groups. So I really, really appreciate that. So I am interested to hear what the response has been like with other parents. Obviously Aaron is a parent have kids that have participated? So as Joanna's kids they've participated, but I know that sometimes doing ministry online with kids can be tricky because of a lot of different reasons that we probably don't need to get into. But it can be a point of hesitation for parents. So I'm wondering what it was like to pitch this idea to the parents, and then what their response has been like. I know first starting off, a lot of the parents were just excited that there was something that was being offered. We got a lot of response from a lot of parents just saying thank you, you know, for putting this out there that there's an opportunity to reach out to our kids. I think some more things I became from some of the kids not knowing when we first started off not knowing each other, you know, because we have people from other mission centers. Every every at the very beginning. We have people well, starting when COVID hit we had people from all different places that We're logging on,

which was wonderful, but then my kids were like trying to find kids that they knew, in that mix, that it was a blessing. And you know, with that, that they were meeting new friends, but it also, you know, was a little bit different for them. But now we kind of have a group that's kind of been through the whole thing together, and they've started to develop some relationships and some friendships, which is pretty fun, which would not have happened otherwise. So parents have kind of been on board with it. Yeah,

Jim Shaffer 15:27

Yeah, I mean, I feel like we definitely have situations when we did early on, I'll use Bloomsburg as an example, where they tried to do a login and they have some students that some children that were, you know, kind of raddison at the beginning, they were very used to like having one on one Sunday school and not having to step outside of their comfort zone. And I know after that initial, you know, time or two of the logging on that they kind of pulled back from that a little bit and found that for them, at least it made more sense for them to to continue to do face to face, Sunday school with just that one on one connection. So it really wasn't necessarily for everyone. I think the interesting thing with the shift that we had with COVID is just the idea that it was no longer like the congregation's decision to do that. It became kind of an individual parents decision, which I think kind of shifted that a little bit. But we've had a lot of really good positive feedback, certainly from people that have participated.

Meredith Carr 16:19

Yeah, I definitely think it helps if the kids have a connection ahead of time like they've seen each other at reunion, or at camps. I think it makes it a little more familiar. Although I don't think it's impossible to build community with kids that you'd never met face to face. I mean, I think it's just how often you get to see them. So if every Sunday for the last three months that gets met, online, I think they begin to feel like they're there. They know each other and they're friends. So and one of the things that came up with starting online Sunday school, my granddaughter lives in Oregon, and she flew out for reason. and got to know Aaron's kids and they had stayed connected online. And my grandson that lives out there was too young to fly in for a reunion. So he didn't but now he's friends with Aaron's son just because they've connected online and they've never met face to face. So I mean, I think it helps to have that face to face friendship, but I don't think it's it's you know, critically important. I mean, I think it's possible to develop community just online.

Ann Shaffer 17:31

I know my own two are always looking for their what they call their Sunday school friends on the main service page. So that's kind of fun. They'll scroll through all that faces and find their Sunday school friends, which is pretty cool. And these are people like you said that I've never met in person they've never met in person, but they have met through the online Sunday school. Yeah, I think it is interesting because when COVID first hit, I think my family joined your guys's online ministry a couple times and my kids liked it, don't get me wrong, but they did feel out of place because they felt like everybody else knew each other and they didn't necessarily know anybody. So it's been interesting to, to navigate that space of Okay, we love this idea. But they weren't super enthused about it just because it was nerve racking the nervousness of

stepping into a new classroom or a new camp or whatever, transferred over really well, online. So but then I will say that our congregation has done some online stuff for kids and we have some seeker families who have visited, you know, surrounding congregations that hadn't made their way to Salt Lake yet, but their kids still participate. And my kids are now good friends with their kids, and they technically have not met yet. So we're now just kind of chomping at the bit of one we can actually be together and meet in person. So I totally hear what you You are saying in that it's not impossible to make friendships online when you haven't met face to face. But it does make it easier when there's that connection already. So, and I had expressed early on kind of to our mission, certain leadership that it was really important for the groups to be small. At one point we had, like 30 people logging on, and that's 30 families. And that was a lot not only for the for the person who's facilitating to manage because you don't even know what the kids names are, because they often have their parents names on there. So I'm trying to talk to kids and address them so they can feel valued and heard with our discussions. But I didn't even know who they were, you know, and that was very difficult when we had so many and I was really hoping that and it sounds like a lot of people have kind of started their own local Sunday schools, which was always kind of my my hope that you'd have some people that would take our idea and kind of go with it locally. So kids can have those personal connections.

Jim Shaffer 20:01

And that was part of the learning process for us to I know like, you know, we ended up with 35 or 40. People were like, oh, how we manage this and someone's like, well, there's these breakout rooms, and we tried those and, and that kind of work, but kind of didn't. And then over time, I feel like whether it was, you know, just people just being overwhelmed with all of the online stuff, our numbers to kind of shrink a little bit. I mean, it's interesting, you know, now, when you look at the numbers that we have, and the people that are coming to join the online Sunday school, the majority of them are not from our mission center, I would say probably, maybe 20 to 25% are from MMC. And the rest of them are coming from other places, and it's some people that we had connections to before, but it's a lot of people that, you know, logged on and they've just continued to, to take that online journey with us. But the more we do it, it seems like the more we have people there from outside the mission center, which is kind of neat.

Meredith Carr 20:53

And I think people that don't live within close proximity to any congregation. So they're a Community of Christ member, but they don't have anywhere to attend on Sundays. And they have children that they really want to be a part of our faith community. And I think that the online Sunday school is really helped in that regard that they have so they can connect with the community. And then perhaps, you know, they'll be able to attend reunions or campster, or some other ways to kind of add to that connection, but just on every Sunday basis, it's given them an avenue to connect with us.

Brittany Mangelson 21:33

Yeah, I know that in the Salt Lake congregation, we've kind of seen the same thing, where people who don't have a congregation near them or they're not meeting online, or whatever it

may be, have just hung around and I'm happy to be that place for people, especially in this time of so much isolation and feeling disconnected from a community. I'm very, very much into the community aspect of church and so however, We can maintain that I am always pro that. So it's it's good to hear that people are able to still engage their children, even if they're not connected with a congregation that is able to provide that ministry. But then it's also great to hear that there have been some congregations that have been able to take the idea that you have started and to do it on their own. So any other reflections on how the kids have responded maybe from the parents in the group or just any other any other reflections on that?

Erin Hook 22:35

My son especially has loved engaging online with his friends. He did say in the beginning, he did have a hard time finding them through all the other children that he didn't know. So he would get really disappointed afterwards saying that it just wasn't the same as before. And the number of participants has gone down since then, and he hasn't really been complaining about it now. But I think it was just an adjustment because he was transitioning from what he was used to to something new. But I can tell that the kids are. They leave the experience, feeling good. And like they've connected with others. It's been really hard during COVID for the kids just to be home all the time and not see their friends. So this has given them an opportunity to connect that they wouldn't otherwise have.

Brittany Mangelson 23:33

So I'm curious about the curriculum that you all have used? That's one question that I know that I get a lot. And my go to is just always the church's resources. But I'm wondering what curriculum you have used and even if it is the church's resources, how you have been able to adapt it online. What does a typical gathering for you all look like? I'll speak to that one, because we were the original ones planning it. And then Joanna has nicely stepped in. Thank you. When we first started out, I was pretty new to the Sunday school stuff, because I wasn't really the one doing our Sunday school lessons. But when we kind of transitioned to more online, some of our teachers were not as comfortable teaching online, as we would be as being teachers. So with that, we were already using the world church resources, and they are absolutely wonderful. I can't say enough about how many great things they have out there for our kids. And so that was always our core structure to it. And the nice part about that is that our kids were going from the Sunday school experience, listening to the scripture story, kind of breaking it down into more familiar language for them, and then they would be going into for most of them going into our main services, and hearing that story, and that scripture being referenced again, and I remember The first time that that I was we were listening to the service with my kids. And the first time that they were like, wait, that's the story. We just told him Sunday school and it was so neat to be able to have them make those connections. And so we've always kind of used the world church resources that are out there and just kind of added pieces on law pieces for online that would benefit the kids. We've added some videos and some different stories and things that would enhance the lesson that would be online.

Jim Shaffer 25:29

I know for us, like, you know, again, having some experience of teaching online and and and typically takes things wherever they were from the world church that was awesome, and then tries to analyze them, which over time, we've kind of throttle back on that a little bit. The first couple weeks, you know, it was like, there was one point where we ordered some sort of biblical figurines off the internet and my son made some sort of video with stop animation for the first scripture story. There's the infamous paper cut out decided They made a walkover while they're building some pyramids, I mean, there was some pretty, pretty impressive stuff those first couple of weeks. But we found it, we found that, you know, sometimes simpler is better. And so I think that the format we really kind of settled into was, you know, if people were coming in, we tried to kind of greet greet, people will have them kind of sign in either on the chat or we fill around, sometimes people just sign their names on some opening slide. And then we would typically do 10 to 15 minutes of like campfire songs or praise music. And that kind of got the kids kind of moving around, and then and would do some sort of introduction. We'd go through the Scripture and some of the materials from the church. And then from there, we would typically find some sort of a video that would go along with the Scripture, that would kind of again, break that down in the kid language. And then we'd usually finish up with some sort of craft and in most cases, the craft part. You know, we'd spend some time scouring the internet trying to find some crafts that were were interesting for the kids that were involved, involving, not just like people coloring page, but you know, kind of like building something or creating something. I'm trying to think of some of the crafts we did.

Brittany Mangelson 27:05

Well, the interesting challenge with the crafts was during COVID, I didn't want to force people to have to go out and purchase items, because some people weren't comfortable going out to buy items, or they weren't available. So I had to find crafts that would be able to be done with whatever they could find. So a lot of the craft ideas were common items that you'd have in your kitchen or bathroom or whatever. And then I would, I would just say, and an alternative to that would be this and give lots of different options for whatever people had at their house because I didn't want to have people feeling like they needed to go out and purchase things during that time.

Jim Shaffer 27:40

And it was kind of neat, like, as we did the crafts to kind of see how creatively some parents and some kids did the craft, you're like, Oh, we told you to use marshmallows, but you use duct tape. Good job, you know, so kids would find ways to do those crafts with whatever they had available. And then typically we would finish up having them share out the craft we created and we'd sing some sort of song together and then They would kind of have one of the kids volunteer to close out in prayer. So um, that tended to be the format that we found this to work pretty well.

Ann Shaffer 28:05

We just found that the kids, regardless of what the theme was, or the scripture story, they really just wanted to feel valued and heard. So I learned a lot at the beginning to talk less and let the kids talk more, because that's what they really enjoyed was that piece of feeling like



they could share out what whatever was, you know, we always did highs and lows, so they could kind of share out personal things that were celebrations and things that were a struggle for them during that time, recognizing that it was challenging for everybody. And we kind of they kind of heard that from each other. This is a struggle, not only for kids, but for adults too. But also just so that they felt like that their their ideas were heard. That was an important piece that we kind of learned early on to with us.

Meredith Carr 28:50

I think another thing we learned early on, was that you have to really have a facilitator with the child. So I think at first we were kind of thinking like, oh, kids can log on and just do the Sunday school and it became clear like, no, there has to be an adult there to kind of just, you know, give them the supplies or help them stay focused or not interrupt that kind of thing. So, so our vision of what it was going to be really evolved, I think over over time and with the talents of a gym and and being able to figure out what worked and what didn't work so well in an online format. So I will say our very first class had a ton of glitches, like we didn't, we weren't that familiar with zoom. So we didn't know you couldn't have two devices in the same room logged on without like a terrible echo. And there was and you know, we were like fretting and like oh, no, and we just wanted it to be so perfect. And at the end of the class Ann had asked if one of the kids wanted to do a closing prayer and and Aaron son now offer that prayer. And I thought, well, this is why we're doing it, right? This was, he just made it all worth it for him to say thank you God for such an amazing class. It was like okay the glitches and the technical stuff that's not important what's important is they had a moment to connect and I think we have to remember that that it you know, sometimes the best laid plans don't work out or the vision might change a little bit but the kids are getting a lot out of that connection and that's really the priority

Jim Shaffer 30:27

And even to that flipping back two things number one, it works better if you have one facilitator report per child if you can do that because trying to like do the online Sunday school and like manage our own children and like like we've gotten very good at like sending like like like death darts stares like without people seeing on screen maybe you guys have been fat as well. But beyond just like the best laid plans like going with it sure. Like anybody with any sense we'd be beginning would have been like what are you people thinking? Like our first setup when we did this like we were in Gatchelville, which is like 50 miles From any sort of civilization, with no actual internet, trying to run this through a 3g hotspot, and trying to figure out why it was glitchy, you know, and I mean, it led to like, you know, we eventually purchase internet at Gatchelville. So that would work better. And then right about that time, boom. And then so we found ourselves, you know, dealing with not just the learning part about working with kids, but also the technological aspects of that are like, what kind of microphone do I need, so they can hear me presenting the lesson? And how do I get the audio to work when I show the video and a lot of those things as well have definitely been added challenges that we've had to try to figure out as we've gone through the process.

Brittany Mangelson 31:39

So I have to say, because this is not going to be a video podcast, people will not be able to see how much we're all laughing on mute and going through these glitches, and it just is so relatable. And I just wanted to acknowledge that because I think so often we feel like we have to have all of our ducks in a row before we can do something. It has to be perfect or you know that our performance or whatever you want to call it has to be top notch. But really ministry, a lot of it is throwing spaghetti against the wall and seeing what sticks and experimenting. And really I mean, the mission prayer says risking something new and with risk can come vulnerability and mistakes and humor. And so I just really appreciate hearing how the ministry has evolved. And yeah, just recognizing that it was not perfect from the start. It's totally relatable to anybody listening to this. So, Joanna, I want to give you an opportunity to share a little bit about you know, the, the, the the format and the structure of the class because I hear that now you're kind of on deck in the planning, is that right? You're currently planning the services?

Joanna Wardrop 32:55

Yes, yes, I am. And I was saying when I took over the teaching, we had just finished all the Pentecost and ascension and Easter stuff. And it was like, What am I going to teach now? So I did go to world church. And they had started with the first lesson in sacredness of creation. And so I kind of went with that and built on it. And so at this point, I'm using the world church material. And I'm sticking an enduring principle onto that, so that we've been reviewing and learning a new Enduring Principle each week.

Brittany Mangelson 33:35

I think that that's so important for children's ministry. And I know that I usually try to try to bring it back to the enduring principles too, because, yes, our theology is grounded in the Bible and in the Gospels and in the story and life of Jesus, but we do have a little quirky identity that I just fell deeply in love with, and that is the Enduring Principles. So I appreciate that you are, you know, explicitly lifting those up and helping our kids really grasp them and take some ownership of our enduring principles as well. So I'm now wondering because we are moving into, you know, reunion season and camping season where traditionally we would be meeting together. And that is such an important part of Community of Christ identity, especially for children and youth ministry. I'm curious to know what your plans are for the campaign season. And then I also just kind of have like an overarching question of you know, just general things that you think that mission centers or congregation should be considering when moving online planning reunion materials that kind of thing online. What what is that going to look like for you all.

Joanna Wardrop 34:57

So the for the kids in reunion seasons, the Mid Atlantic mission center and the eastern Great Lakes mission center, they've both gotten together and we're doing a 31 Days, 31 Ways. So there's going to be different activities throughout the month of July. As far as the children ministry goes, the children and youth ministry from the Mid Atlantic mission center has gotten together and we've decided to put some different activities online for the children to do and the youth to do and so I've really been spearheading the children's activities since the parents

probably will not be taking the week of reunion off because we don't have reunion and so they're going to be working. I've decided not to do a lot of zoom. We will be continuing with the zoom with Sunday school. However, most of what I've done and and and Jim have helped me do a couple of these two I've done some videos and posted them on YouTube. So I've done object lessons with scriptures. I'm actually getting ready my girls are very excited. We're going to be doing a video soon talking about Jesus calling the storms and making root beer floats at the same time with that, so they're very excited to help mommy with that one. And just I have some family challenges, kindness bingo, nature photo hunt, ways to keep in touch with different members in the mission center. And then Jamie and Drew Lynch who are also on the children and youth ministry team, actually Jamie's in charge of that are doing different activities for the junior high and senior high kids.

Ann Shaffer 36:47

I'm super grateful for all of them that have done a lot of stuff for the kids in our mission center. I know. It takes a lot of time and sometimes it's a thankless job when you put all that effort into it. So thanks to Joanna and all the crew that's put together a lot of stuff for our kids for this time.

Brittany Mangelson 37:04

Yeah, that was a lot of creativity. Obviously, that was that's been put into that a lot of intentionality, a lot of thinking outside the box, I appreciate that you said that you were maybe gonna move away from zoom for some of those things and have it really be family focused and things that, you know, people can do together with their families. Because at this point in the pandemic, I do think that at least my kids are a little bit zoomed out, though I do really appreciate I mean, I have to echo what and said that I really appreciate that there are ministers that are willing to get creative and to you know, keep the keep the energy going. Because the loss of camps, I am feeling it really strongly this year, and I know that everybody is so the fact that there are still ministers out there that are willing to put forth their best creative effort to making it a good summer. I just deeply, deeply appreciate So, if a mission center and I understand that we're several months into COVID, but what kinds of things would a mission center or a congregation need to consider when doing online ministries with kids? We've talked about it a little bit. But if people are hearing this for the first time, I mean, gosh, I'm even like speaking for myself, thinking, you know, we've tried a few things here and there, but like, nothing's really stuck for the kids in our congregation. And I'm feeling like we could have should have been doing more. So if there was a person like Brittany Mangelson that came to you and said, help, or what should I be doing? What should I be doing? What would your advice be to them?

Ann Shaffer 38:44

I just think you just kind of have to think about the needs of the group that you have. I know it's super important. We've talked about this a lot on here of just making sure that those kids feel valued. So when your numbers get so big that you don't feel like you're having that personal connection. You probably need to to break it into smaller groups, that kind of happened naturally for us or I was going to try to reach out to the other mission centers and just say, Hey, can we lit up our groups only for numbers, reasons to make sure that all kids are feeling valued

and heard. I think that's really important. And we start to lose kids when their voices aren't heard. And that's in person, or even our online probably even more important online. So that piece of just kind of make sure you're listening to the needs of the kids.

Jim Shaffer 39:29

And I would also say, you know, like, for me, I mean, things are definitely gonna change each week. But I think the fact that our Sunday school has had the same basic structure each week is beneficial. I think especially right now, when everything is just kind of up in the air and we don't really know what's going to happen tomorrow or, or where things are going, um, have something that has a structure to it that kids know that hey, every, you know, Sunday morning at 10am. Like I can log into this thing and we're gonna sing some songs and we're gonna do this and we're gonna do that. I think that that does bring something to it, and it doesn't need to be the same structure for everyone. What we've done is work for us. But some sort of structure that, you know, there's some sort of continuity to the way that it's delivered. And I think that's important to also try to find someone else who's willing to help you with it. That's not in your house over time. Because it's one of those things like you start it, and people are like, Hey, can you guys do this for like, a couple weeks? And you're like, sure. And then a couple weeks later, people were like, We noticed that you're still doing this, but we're not gonna say anything. Because if you don't, if we say something, then it might go away. And then you're like, Hey, Ryan, we'd really like to maybe like kind of transition out of this and Ryan doesn't answer your emails, or he or he doesn't have anybody and then then you have to have to guilt trip for Joanna into doing this, who is like a superstar because not only is she doing the online Sunday school, but she's also like, simultaneously single handedly wrangling two children at the same time. It's like a superpower

Ann Shaffer 40:47

It's way impressive. Way impressive.

Jim Shaffer 40:50

So definitely making sure when you do this, you know that you have a plan moving forward of like, at some point you press they're gonna be like, okay, like, you know, I can't do this week or something might come up and having something in plan that of how you're going to be relieved of that duty or share that responsibility, so you don't get overwhelmed,

Joanna Wardrop 41:07

I would say, also have a contingency plan. I know Erin has helped me with the zoom and Jim and Anna have helped me with the zoom and the tech part of it. But in doing that, you're worried about the connection and the weather, not only where you are, but where they are. And if things freeze up, you need to be ready to just go with it and, and just try to keep it smooth. And I would say the other thing is with anything that you're trying new, give it a little time because I know sometimes we try something and it doesn't quite reach our expectation the first week or so, and then we're just like, okay, that doesn't work. But I think that you need to give it time and tweak it as it goes along as opposed to just giving up completely on a new on a new idea. Because you know, like they were saying with the first lesson in the PR you just

don't Don't know who you're reaching and who you're touching. And you know, we're so critical of ourselves. And yet, there are people out there kids out there who need it and are getting something from it.

Jim Shaffer 42:11

I think just from a logistics standpoint, everything I've mentioned is that I think if you are doing this, that it is best to have at least two people involved in the process, you know, for several reasons. I mean, I get into the liability in the two deep leadership kind of thing. But beyond that, just the logistics of it. Having one person like that's been my job throughout the process is I'm kind of getting the tech stuff set up. And I'm kind of managing the chat. And I'm kind of like, you know, muting and unmuting people I'm kind of facilitating the meeting, and that freeze and up to go through and basically really make those connections with kids and focus on delivering the content and actually delivering the lesson. So that's what we've tried to recreate with Joanna and again, we've had some issues with technology for sure with that, but just having a couple people there, someone can kind of run the back end and someone can kind of run the front end to us as we've been invaluable. It kind of frees the person who's doing a class up from being free. got about the tech. And it's an opportunity to to find people with different skill sets. I mean, you may find somebody who's like, you know what, I'd love to do this the Sunday school thing, but I don't even know how to turn on zoom. And that might be a person who's fantastic with kids, but they're worried about that part of it. And you might have somebody else it's like, I don't know about kids, but I'm really good with the tech stuff. And you have an opportunity for those people to work together in a way that can be beneficial for both and for the mission center and for for the church as well.

Meredith Carr 43:27

I was gonna say this whole process has really highlighted for me how important it is to have connections with people outside of your just own congregation. If I had not visited Gatchelville, I wouldn't have known they had such an amazing Sunday school and Vacation Bible School program. And if Erin hadn't come to reunion, the kids wouldn't have made those friendships that they desire to continue. So I think it's important to realize that, you know, our faith community extends beyond the walls of our congregation. So find the people that have the skills like Jim was saying that are able to contribute in specific ways. And I think I think all congregations are are uniquely gifted. But that doesn't mean you know, your congregation has to do everything, look to look to other congregations that you can connect with or contribute to, or benefit from their ministry. That's just so important. I think.

Ann Shaffer 44:25

I'm going to add into what you said of we have some really gifted kids I've learned in this process, too, that a lot of them love to be in the spotlight of being able to share. So you know, having a spot for them, where you maybe let them tell the Bible story for that Sunday, or, you know, they love to be creative in that way. And giving them a heads up ahead of time kind of lessens that anxiety. But we have some really gifted kids out there who could take some of that responsibility as well. And kids love hearing from kids.

Brittany Mangelson 44:54

I'm glad you brought that up. And because I think Meredith, you already touched on that Erin's son gave the prayer and one of the first gatherings or possibly the first gathering, and we have permission to share that at the end of this podcast, so everyone will be able to hear that. But Erin, I guess then for you, I have the question. As a parent, I know that when my kids have been asked to participate in ministry, a lot of times it's, they say yes, because they really like the counselor, or they really like, you know, the Minister that that has asked them so when it comes from me, their dumb old mom, it doesn't it's not as well received. So I'm just wondering, I mean, I specifically called out Erin, but this is really for anyone, how is it getting kids engaged in online ministries? Because I know that when my kids have been asked, you know, it is funneled through me and so they're still kind of hesitant. It's like, Mom, you know, they want me to get on zoom. So I guess I'll do it and I just have seen less enthusiasm with my own kids, but I'm wondering if my kids are just the Debbie Downer anomaly.

Erin Hook 46:09

My daughter who's 12, she's started becoming more shy. And so she hasn't really shown any interest in participating online. But at church, if she's given the opportunity to be like in a puppet show, or maybe say a prayer, she's really willing to do that, and happy to do so. But my son, he is really, he really likes to be the center of attention. So he's always offering to participate and volunteer and do things. So he really likes the experience online. And I think he likes to see himself online, too.

Brittany Mangelson 47:00

I love that. I love. I mean, obviously anyone that is a parent or has been around more than one kid knows how different personalities are. But in thinking of even my own kids how vastly vastly different they are. So it's it's just funny again, everyone on the call is giggling a little bit because we all get it.

Meredith Carr 47:22

Um, Jim, didn't you tell me about the first time how your son Connor was like, I just want to read the Scripture. When am I going to get to the scripture? And you were like, Hey, I like this.

Jim Shaffer 47:35

Yeah, and I think for us, it was that was one of those things that kind of led to some of the stuff that we that we created. The beginning was like, you know, here's an opportunity and our kids, Gatchelville and our mission centers. Well, I've done a phenomenal job of involving our kids in worship. You know, like you said, beyond just the offering plate like and beyond just the children's moments like our kids are very, very involved in Capitol Hill. Whether it's, you know, playing a slightly less than average introit music on the piano or whether it's, you know, you're doing some sort of reading, like, that's always been part of our kids experience in this church online kind of changed that a little bit, you know? And for me, I was like, Okay, well, what are the skill sets that my kids have like to get them involved? And that's where kinda like we did that first video, you know, my son's way of doing stop animation videos, I can send you one with a Dramamine if you'd like to watch it after we're finished. So we're like, well, let's, you

know, we the scripture was, so let's do the scripture thing. And so we set the whole thing up and I remember you know, we're on the kitchen counter and we're trying to figure out like, what lights to turn on the lights to turn off and it's like a whole family thing where like, one person's run the camera and somebody moving popsicle sticks and somebody's like, moving Jesus while he's getting baptized by John the Baptist. And, I mean, it became this really major production and I just remember, you know, when we showed it, just like how excited my son was, Connor was, you know, for people to see what he had created. And same thing with some of the artistic stuff like my daughter loves to draw and so, you know, let's let's sketch out that The pyramids on this this ginormous peach a piece of butcher paper, and let's, you know, make coloring these little figurines and have them walk across the screen. I guess that's part of it too is, you know, where's the giftedness lie? What are the interests of the kids that you're involving in that process? And how can you kind of, you know, open up opportunities for them to share in the ways that they're gifted. So that is pretty neat.

Brittany Mangelson 49:23

Something that we often say on Project Zion, when we talk about mission is that mission is contextual. So meeting the needs of the people where you're at and responding to that. And I'm going to sound really, I don't know what the word is dumb here, saying that, you know, I had not really in hearing you talk, Jim. I, I hadn't really like put that with children's ministry, right? Like, I'm not a natural kids teacher. So I just kind of stick to the script and I'm too afraid to veer off, but really tapping into the interests of the kids. I think is key and can especially be key when it comes to online ministries where there is maybe a little bit more hesitancy. So I'm not sure what that means for me, but I feel like you've just cracked open my world into actually listening to the kids a little bit more and responding to their natural interest. So thank you for that.

Jim Shaffer 50:22

Well, to be fair, on the flip side of that, we've also had like weekly epic battles over who gets to play the tambourine during during praise music. So, you know, you want to be careful how far you want to go with that we're at the bottom of the tambourine because every every Sunday, it's like, we're like, oh, it's time for Sunday school again. And once someone's salty, by the end of praise music every single week, and then we got to try to figure out how to bring him back in.

Brittany Mangelson 50:46

I love that the tambourine is the source of contention. This is so relatable, so relatable. Oh, too funny. So I think we've kind of already answered this question, but I guess I just want to hear maybe a few more of your thoughts just on creating community online. Do you think that it can be built online? I know that there still is hesitancies. within the church, I think that COVID kind of forced us all to face this question of online ministries. And can we really maintain and strengthen communities online? And my hope would be that most people would say, yes. But I just want to hear from you all, do you think that you will continue to incorporate online ministries after COVID? Whatever after COVID looks like? And then just in general terms, do you think that we can build and maintain communities in online spaces?

Joanna Wardrop 51:47

I think definitely, we can build communities online. I think especially with this generation, they, they've always had this in their lives as opposed to us old people who had to learn it and get used to it. And honestly, I have found between Sunday school class and our online worship services that I have been fed, I'm an extrovert and so the thought of social distancing with just in my house with just my two children and, and myself, was pretty terrifying at the beginning, but just getting to see faces getting to hear that getting to hear some of the chaos in the background with the kids really has fed me and I know my children had been very excited to still get to see their friends and honestly, they probably I won't say probably they definitely get more interaction with children throughout church in the mission center with COVID. And on this online ministry than before, because mine were the only two kids their age at our church. And so now they actually get to see their friends that they go to camp with and, you know, my daughter was baptized with Anna Jim's daughter. So they have that connection, but they get to see each other now instead of just a church. So, you know, I definitely think you can build community and I've had many friends who, you know, have never in person met, but they have that community in that relationship.

Jim Shaffer 53:22

I would say in terms of continuing forward, it's on to whether or not we will or whatever it's like, how can we not? And I think when we look at like our mission center, even beyond the children's ministry, you know, you'll flip through the screen on a on a Sunday morning, and there are so many people that are connected to our faith community and have deep ties to our community, but have not set foot in one of our congregations for years because they're so far away. And to just to have situations and hear those people just tell about how grateful they are, to be able to have that connection with people. I don't think there's any way we can really go back. It's just a question of how do we manage that? How do we manage one more thing without like sacrificing our sanity or the programs that we have in place. And that's something that we'll definitely have to talk about as a group. And I think to me, like, you know, there's definitely ways to use online to build community, I look forward to when we can get to a point where it's not solely online community. And I know that we've really looked at finding opportunities to take that online community and try to find ways to kind of turn that into something that's not online. So I know, for example, you know, one of the people that was in our online church service was just so super excited. I mean, she's living in a retirement home. She's very, very conscientious about the fact that, you know, COVID is a bad thing for people who have her age group. And so her social structure in that that retirement village like, she can't really visit with any of those people because she's terrified to go out and she's almost being ostracized for that fear. And so for her to log on on Sundays and see people she was just so excited and our kids went through on a day and you wrote up a little card. So great to see you at church yesterday. And, you know, next time we saw her on zoom, I showed her the cards that we had there. So things like that. I know, you know, Aubrey just randomly got a letter in the mail from her counselor from junior camp last summer, and just how cool it was, especially in these times, like something that's not online, you're like, Oh, I got this physical letter. That's pretty cool. And, you know, to have all ready to take a moment to write back to her counselor in a non virtual way. I think there's there's some novelty to that that wasn't present three



months ago, you know, a few months ago. So cool. You get on zoom and see blank. Now it's like, oh, it's really neat. I got a letter in the mail, you know, and so, that idea of honestly, solely building community online, but using it as a way to kind of further the building of community that we're doing face to face in the physical world.

Meredith Carr 55:54

I just think back to the way this idea kind of started. came from the awareness that the kids were already connected online. They were already doing playing games together and kids messenger and they were already connected. So it was just like how can we help this be focused on faith and Enduring Principles and stuff to like, how can we tap into that connection they they already have. So I absolutely am with Jim that, that really can't go away. I mean, I feel like it's it's so helpful. I mean, we even had one Sunday, where, maybe a month into it, and Erin wasn't feeling well. So she said, Oh, we're not going to be a church, the kids, you know, won't be able to log on. And we were like, Okay, and then we said, Oh, no, wait a minute, they could log on from home and she was like, Oh, yeah, that's like a whole different way of thinking like, yeah, you don't have to log on from the church. You can log in from anywhere. So that's kind of the beauty of it. It's so even though they weren't able to Come to the worship service that day they still were able to do Sunday school. So I think there's just an element that's so important. And there's so many possibilities someone had talked about. She has a grandchild that wants to be baptized, but she has to have the pre baptismal classes. So perhaps we could do that online in a virtual class. I mean, there's just a ton of possibilities with it. And I think you can't unring that bell at this point. I think people are are connected in ways that surprised them online so I hope it doesn't go away.

Erin Hook 57:37

As far as community building online, I, I really love the opportunity to be, to stay connected and I'd like it to continue. But I think that we also really miss physical connections that we have, even though the kids are able to see their friends and peers. They're also missing the older members of the Church, the adults that they connected with every week and that they got to see. So I think it's also easier to if you know someone, or if you have these friendships prior to the online experience, because it's like you're seeing your friends again. And it might be harder for new people to come in, where they don't know anyone. And, you know, they're kind of one face of many, but not really know anyone in the group. So I think it's important to try to figure out how we can connect with someone who may be a first time worship service participant and figure out how we can make them feel welcome so that they'll come back again that we saw them and that we're interested in establishing a relationship with them.

Brittany Mangelson 58:54

I think that that's a really important point and I feel like I've been doing online ministries for So long with Latter-day Seeker Ministries and things and so I kind of just assume that everyone's comfortable with it and assume that everybody's going to know what's going on. And that's not the case at all. You know, there's a lot of people where COVID was the first time that they had ever downloaded zoom, which felt very odd to me, because I've been using it, you know, years at this point. But yeah, I think it's really important to remember that these friendships, this

routine, all these things that we've just become accustomed to and that we're comfortable with, it doesn't necessarily mean that everyone is comfortable with it. And then yeah, I totally agree about keeping online ministries as an element of what congregations or mission centers are regularly providing. I know that in Salt Lake, we have several members who live very far away hours and hours away. But their records are in Salt Lake and they don't have a local congregation and we've been able to connect with them in you know, a A lot more often than in regular times, because we normally would just see them at Mission center conference. But now we get to see them every single week. And so there's been a plea of sorts of, you know, when you guys can meet back in your building, don't forget about me, you know, let's, let's keep this going somehow. And so we're currently exploring what that will look like. Even though Salt Lake is not planning on meeting together for quite some time, but just knowing that someday we will be sitting in a Pew together again, and knowing that the outreach potential of doing online ministries and keeping that as part of what you're doing as a group is just really, really important. So yeah, just big ditto to everything that's been said. So, I guess we're kind of coming to the end of our conversation. And usually I just like to ask if there was anything else that we missed any final thoughts that you weren't able to say? and so on. I'll just throw that out to you. Does anyone have any final thoughts before we say goodbye?

Ann Shaffer 1:01:07

I just want to say thank you for having us. It's been a lot of fun to kind of re explore our journey that started in January as a group with all this and just think about all the different things that we've tried and things that haven't worked and things that have worked. And just think about, you know, all those kids and have been blessed. But we've also been blessed in that process. So it's been a lot of fun to kind of talk through that journey with you today.

Meredith Carr 1:01:35

And I just want to emphasize again, something you had said earlier, Brittany, we tend to think it has to be perfect. Before we try something and I think what we have all discovered is try it and perfect it as you go. So don't be afraid, you know, if you have that idea or you you have that, that voice that's you know, kind of nudging you to do that. something new, take the chance, and it can lead somewhere wonderful, like, like this as

Erin Hook 1:02:09

One thing that I just thought of that I wanted to share was, um, as a new member of Community of Christ, my family had lots of questions. Most of my extended family are Catholic. And so I was speaking to an extended family member, and I was telling them about our children's ministry. And they said, well, it's almost like you had a heads up that something was happening and that you wouldn't be able to meet at church. It's amazing that you had this already set up. And I said, Well, you know, we belong to a prophetic church. And I just am really grateful that Meredith felt a strong need to get this started and follow through with it. So thank you. And thanks to everyone.

Brittany Mangelson 1:03:02

Once again, everyone just has big smiles on our faces and maybe some giggles because I thought the same thing and I mean, I understand that Community of Christ uses prophetic maybe a little differently from the tradition that I was raised in. But I have to say like, I'm remember when we had the online communion.

Joanna Wardrop 1:03:23

That's what I was gonna say. I remember that when I was like, wait a minute, we just thought of that.

Brittany Mangelson 1:03:29

Right? It's like we were totally just primed and prepped for this, and we can't help but think that but that in and of itself is a god moment. And you know, we, in my little neck of the church, internet world, we've been able to share the sacrament of communion with people that haven't been able to take it and months and months, if not years. But because of the prophetic impulse and being able to see that this is a need and that it was going to be a need and You know, we've been able to respond and fill that gap for people. So I'm right here with the air. And I think that it's pretty cool that we were just set up and ready to go. And so when a lot of denominations were totally scrambling to figure out how to move church online, you know, a lot of corners of Community of Christ were like, cool. We've been doing this for a few months or a few years or you know, like, we have some experience with it. So I definitely hear what you're saying. So. Okay, anything else?

Joanna Wardrop 1:04:36

Yeah, I just wanted to add, you know, one of the great things about this, and it's it has been mentioned before, whether it be, you know, with children or with someone who, you know, is unable to go to church, one person living in a nursing home, that one of the beauties of online ministry is that you don't have the issue of but there's only one item I've been told that a lot, I've actually been fighting for children's ministry a long time in our mission center. And oftentimes it's but we don't have that many kids or we only have one. And so I really like the fact that you can use online ministry to hit that one because, you know, as a church, you know, worth of all persons all are called, we definitely see the importance of every one and not just seeing and so this, this enables us to hit every single one.

Brittany Mangelson 1:05:32

I think that is that is such a good point to raise. And how much easier is it to pay attention to the one when we are all able to be connected on the internet together. So yeah, I really, really appreciate that, Joanna. Well, I just want to thank you all for being here today. This was a conversation that I was really eager to have because I know that a lot of congregations or mission centers have have done online ministries with kids before but because I was able to attend a timer to with you guys and being in touch with Ryan, the mission center President, I just decided like no this this is actually a conversation that that needs to happen and could be helpful for others. So I just want to thank you all for joining us today and being part of this conversation and lending your voice and your experience. I think it's it's really important and will really drive us into the future because again, just to echo what everyone is saying, I think

that we're going to need to continue to do this in some fashion moving forward. So thanks again.

Josh Mangelson 1:06:50

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