

ES 70 | Before Women's Ordination in Community of Christ  
Project Zion Podcast

Katie Langston 0:17

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Brittany Mangelson 1:00

Hello, everyone, welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This is Brittany Mangelson and I will be your host...kind of for this episode. We are actually doing something that we have never done on Project Zion before. I have on David Howlett David is a scholar, a historian, and a professor at Smith College in Massachusetts. And his students recently did a class project that might have some interest to the Community of Christ crowd whether you are a lifelong member or a seeker. And that project is a podcast on women's ordination in Community of Christ. And so when we the Project Zion team heard about this podcast series, this project that these students had done, we decided that it would be great to share it on our platform. So I have David on today and we are going to introduce the project. He's going to share a little bit more about it. And then we will dive right into the first episode. And so over the next several weeks, you will be able to hear this project. So, David, I'm really excited to have you on today and why don't you share a little bit about yourself.

David Howlett 2:22

So I'm a professor of visiting professor of religion at Smith College in North Hampton, Massachusetts. I'm a scholar of religion in America with interests also more broadly, and globalization of Christianity, pilgrimage, and in specifically the history of the Community of Christ in the late 20th century. So I've written about that and books in the past and articles. And this in particular, arises partially out of that interests, but also out of a class project where I have pedagogical goals where I'm trying to help students learn things about historical research. Other kinds of skills in this case about how do you write and produce a podcast?

Brittany Mangelson 3:06

I absolutely love that I love when the academic side of studying history in the world and be used for practical projects, which is exactly what this is. So why don't you tell us a little bit about this project? How did it start? Like what was the the driving behind it, the driving force behind it? And really, what's what's its purpose?

David Howlett 3:29

This project itself, which is a series of podcasts, or student produced student written, came out of my course they offered in the spring semester at Smith College, called Mormonism. I know that term is pretty loaded, like any important term is in terms of like people have different understandings of that. And certainly folks in community Christ do but it's a term I use for legibility to let students know what we might be talking about in the class and make it plural to

because I let them know Oh, we're talking about many forums. That not simply one dominant form. And so I always have a view that when I'm teaching about religion, and it's especially I'm teaching a very specialized class on something like Mormons, I'm not just teaching about religion helping students understand broader processes about how does gender or race or class work in terms of social formations over time. I'm historian, so I think of it in historical terms, too. And so, this particular project is about women's ordination in Community of Christ thinking about how did that process in terms of the women's ordination wouldn't originate? What was it like in the 1980s on the controversy or women's ordination? And what were the experiences of women who are doing now That in itself, it's important maybe to our audience in terms of people being community, Christ or interesting community, Christ, they could find something interesting in that particular story. But it's also a story that's larger than that of talking about late 20th century American Crime. reality. And in the 70s and 80s, there were lots of fights and denominations about could women be ordained. This is true also of American Jews. This is true American Buddhists, it's a much larger phenomenon. So it's a phenomenon thinking about who has access to social authority and power, and who can be empowered in a community that goes much, much larger than a relatively small denomination. So and we see different kinds of responses of donations everywhere. For instance, the Southern Baptists in the same time period, take away women's ordination from women who are already ordained. And so other groups give it to women who hadn't offered it before. So there's no inevitable outcome that comes in the story. And the story of our denomination, too, is a variation of the story that exists out there. So that's my kind of, like bigger kind of goal that I have as a scholar of religion in America, that I wanted my students to kind of understand whether or not they're all that interested in the Community of Christ as a thing to study as I am.

Brittany Mangelson 6:13

And so the actual project, like you said, it's a series of podcasts. Why don't you get into a little bit, a few of the details of that? I've listened to most of them. And I really appreciated that because it the students are talking to the voices of people who lived that experience firsthand. You know, we're kind of on the front lines of the Community of Christ story. So just can you give us a brief, you know, reflection on that?

David Howlett 6:42

Yeah. To get into this process, the students first had to know something about Community of Christ. So we did some research into that. They had to know something about the secondary literature on Community of Christ and women's ordination, which is rather than actually and they had to write a research paper on that. And then they had to interview seven different Women there are seven groups, each one interviewing one woman who was ordained in the 1980s or early 1990s. Oftentimes women who became the leaders in community, Christ or had been leaders already in the LDS Church. This included people like Marge Troeh, who was the women's commission leader in the 1970s and into the early 80s. It included people like Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue, who is on the standing High Council for Community of Christ. It included people like Becky Savage, who was in the first presence of committee Christ, Linda Booth, who served as the first president of the Council of 12. As a woman in Community of Christ. We then had an interview, each person with standardized questions and each set of

questions corresponding to a different theme. And then in their group, they had to write an episode in which they took the quotes from these different kinds of interviews that other groups have produced, and that have produced them their own episode, in which it had a narrative. Have a beginning, middle and end. But then address the different questions that have been asked across the board to these seven different women. So it gave them a chance to tell a story about one episode, for instance, about the call. What's it? What were their experiences of being called to the priesthood? There's an entire episode about that. What about the controversy? How did that play out in their congregation in our family in there what at the time were stakes around women in the priesthood birthday event, the 1984 conference, some of them had been part of it, you know, before this process before like march to part of the leadership of what was then the LDS church, and the process of advocating for it, but that episode gave them the opportunity to talk about that. Then we have later episodes to that. Talk about denominational ministry, congregational ministry, interfaith ministry, and then about changes a final episode asking That's the seventh episode asking. So what changes have they seen in community Christ because of women's ordination? What changes do they hope for the future too, so kind of ending with a future oriented view as well. So the episodes were recorded by the students, they're written by the students. And the title for the podcast to women's rights, a podcast about women's ordination that was also voted on by the class. So it's a class project All in all, I helped edit some of it in terms of like some of the content just to like make sure it's accurate, you know, so that but beyond that, this is their project and these are their voices. So and the music to something they voted on. I wouldn't have chosen the theme music but they love this theme music so I think we'll go with it.

Brittany Mangelson 9:52

I love that I love seeing young people will be able to have creative expression and freedom to do what they want with with their reading. Search. I mean, I think that's really inspiring. And, you know, I just want to say that one of the reasons why I wanted to do this collaboration while I was supportive of it is because of the narrative style. These podcasts have a different feel than most of project sign podcasts. They're very almost journalistic in nature. And I really appreciate that. Yeah, David, I just want to thank you for sharing these audio files with us and helping us amplify these stories to our little audience. And I'm really looking forward to having our folks hear them. So again, listeners, if you're listening to this, then you are about ready to hear this series. And over the next several weeks, we are going to be sharing one of these episodes with you. So David, any final words that you have for us as far as this project goes?

David Howlett 10:53

There is an accompanying website along with the episodes and the accompanying website does have some images from the archives that we have shared with permission. And it also has a student's generated essay just giving background to women's ordination and Community of Christ. And that student, by the way, quoted Brittany Mangelson in that essay, believe it or not,

Brittany Mangelson 11:13

I noticed that actually,

David Howlett 11:14

So there we go. That student did the research on her own. I didn't point her to that at all. So I mean, she found that by googling, and then it's really good writer. And it's intended for someone who has no background in Community of Christ to be able to understand, well, what's going on here who's just interested in the idea of women's ordination? Yeah, the website helps situate that a little bit more to

Brittany Mangelson 11:36

Yes. And we will be sure to link that website in the show notes so you can get more background information on the project. And yeah, thank you so much, David, thank you for joining us in this collaboration. I'm really excited about it.

David Howlett 11:51

Well, thank you for hosting us and giving us this opportunity.

Unknown Speaker 11:58

This is women's rights. podcasts about women's ordination, written and produced by students at Smith College.

Gabby Sciarrotta 12:05

I'm Gabby.

Lydia Gustafson 12:07

And I'm Lydia,

We your host for this episode of women's rights. This season we are exploring the story of women's ordination and Community of Christ, a church with a quarter million members and formally named the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This denomination began ordaining women in 1985. And on the 35th anniversary of these first ordinations, we are taking this time to look back on the journey towards women's ordination in Community of Christ. To do so we've interviewed women ordained in the first decade after the 1985 policy change, women who went on to be leaders in Community of Christ.

Unknown Speaker 12:52

Each episode in this series investigates a different topic and today we are going to look at the immediate era before women's ordination in Community of Christ. For this episode, we asked each of our interviewees three questions to better understand their experience in this era. And our first question we asked, how would you explain your church to an outsider and the era before ordination? What did it mean to be RLDS? This question led to a fascinating discussion with our interviewee Carolyn Brock, a young adult in the 1980s.

Carolyn Brock 13:25

Oh, yes, well, but by the time ordination, things came along. I think the church leaders anyway, were leading us in a process of deconstruction about our history. But I think growing up in a

conservative RLDS home, my dad was a lay pastor or leader and I think that that, usually we were still in the mode of believing in or promoting the idea The one true church restored through Joseph Smith, somehow that there was a restoration of key New Testament principles and priesthood offices and structures and sacraments. So that it would be a more explanatory approach to help people see the truth of that.

Unknown Speaker 14:25

Another interviewee, Charmaine Chvala Smith provided more context for what it meant to be a member of the LDS Church in the 1980s. You'll note that the R and the name are LDS meant a lot to its members, but their name also resulted in them being confused with a much larger church. Charmaine told us,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:43

Some of the the things that that we would typically do if we were meeting someone who was not familiar with the church, is that we would so like if we were in a neighborhood and inviting families to bring their children to Sunday school or Sunday school program or a vacation Bible school or whatever, we would knock doors and we would tell them the name of the church and we would say, you know, we're members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. And then we probably pretty quickly say, not the Mormons. It was almost like it was part of our name to say, not the Mormons, because because Latter Day Saint was in our name, we often had to explain that. So that would be a big part of our identity at that point was that we were distinguishing ourselves as being separate from Mormons. And so then identifying those things, as we saw as being unique in our church, different from Mormons, but also different from other Protestants. So it was very important to talk about our uniqueness.

Lydia Gustafson 15:54

Marge Troeh was head of the RLDS women's department in the 1970s and early 1980s. She was an important advocate for women's ordination. And she had extensive experience working with mainline Protestant groups in the era before women's ordination, she told us the following about her experience.

Marge Troeh 16:12

But having to explain about the church, I would say that it is a community is the word that I use now. And that would not be a word that I would have used them. But a group that is committed to Christ, it believes in modern day revelation, it believes in all are called according to the gifts of God unto them. It believes in stewardship as a response to Christ's ministry. Nowadays, I would say things about committed to peace and inclusion. But to me, the principle of ongoing revelation is important and the being participants in God's world following the leadership Christ.

Lydia Gustafson 17:18

March highlighted the progressive ideas that our LDS leaders advocated in the early 1980s. But the responses from other interviewees helped us understand that the LDS church was undergoing a seismic shift towards those values in the 1970s and early 1980s. in future

episodes, we'll dig deeper into that shift when we talk about the controversy surrounding women's ordination. We knew that ordination and Community of Christ meant something different than what it meant in either a Protestant, Catholic or LDS setting. But we wanted further clarification about that. So we asked, what does it mean to be ordained in the LDS church or the Community of Christ? The responses we received ranged from personal and reflective to offering a specific definition. Linda Booth recently retired as the president of the Council of 12 apostles in Community of Christ, one of the church's highest leadership positions, she explained.

Linda Booth 18:16

What it means to me to be ordained and Community of Christ is that I have the obligation and responsibility to provide sacraments to the people, to be spiritually attuned to God's direction. I was raised all through my life to believe that all people have worth and are called, and that God calls them for specific purposes. But in ordination, that specific purpose is the care and quote spiritual feeding of God's people in a unique way.

Lydia Gustafson 18:55

Additionally, Charmain Chvala Smith reflected on the differences in the meaning of words nation through time.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:02

So very much different in that time than this time, I would say, in that time, so this I'm talking, you know, pre 1985. There was very much the sense that long the term often was used the holy priesthood. So there is a sense, though, it would have been denied by some but that somehow being a priesthood member made you closer to God. And you you had different kinds of authority. If you were ordained, you had an authority that was granted to you by the institution, but people tended to look up to you to as having a validated ministry within the church, that that could be trusted. It was all men. There was, it was not unusual for young men, maybe usually 16 or older, they might be ordained to a deacon or teacher or priest. deacons and teachers didn't have any sacramental ministry in the church, but priests did priests could baptize and serve communion. And so it wasn't unusual 16 or older young men who were very active in a congregation who looked as though they might be able to get past their own ego needs and serve in some ways that they might be called priesthoods And typically, people started out in one of those first three, they're called uronic priesthood that are, particularly ministries in congregational life. So Deacon, teacher and priest, would typically be what someone would be ordained to initially. And then, as they matured or as they became active in the congregation in other ways, they might then be ordained to an elder was typically a next ordination. And those four offices are the offices that bring ministry in local congregation,

Lydia Gustafson 21:46

Beyond these congregational ministries, there were higher offices with regional duties or denomination wide responsibilities.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:54

There are other offices but they tended to be for more regional or for the whole church. So bringing those kinds of ministry that would be outstanding a congregation or within at a congregation, but among several congregations, like the 70s, who were missionaries, that would be for ministry in a particular congregation, but also for a set of congregations in their area. So, so but those four ordinations Deacon, teacher, priest, and elder were congregational ministry, so, so within, you might then have high priests who were often administrators of a region or a stake, which is a grouping of congregations. And you would also have 70s, I mentioned bishops, who are dealing more with the financial elements, the temporal elements, the buildings and those kinds of things too. So So there's a kind of hierarchy, though, by the 80s and 90s. We were very uncomfortable with the idea of there being, you know, different levels of priesthood and talked about it not being like this, but more like this serving side by side. That was already something that was happening before women were ordained, was moving from a hierarchical understanding of the ministries, the different ordinations to a more horizontal mutualistic kind of understanding of priesthood. So we're right in the middle of that happening.

Lydia Gustafson 23:40

The mid 1980s was the era in which women were first ordained, and as Charmaine Chvala Smith sums up for us it was a time of great change and how priesthood was understood in Community of Christ.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:52

And there's a distinction being made in the 1980s between ordained ministry and other kinds of ministry and really a lifting up of the idea that we are all ministers, that children minister to people in the congregation, not just when they're taking up the offering or offering music, but that that those who are on ordained also have ministries that they bring to the congregation. So we're right in the myths at that point of this, really, the church trying to expand the meaning of what ministry is. So yes, there's the distinction between ordained and entertained, but there's kind of a trying to lift up the unearned ministry as being valuable as well.

Lydia Gustafson 24:47

Carolyn Brock, had a very different context for thinking about women's ordination in the 1980s. Well, most of our interviewees lived in the American Midwest. Carolyn and her husband worked as missionaries for Community of Christ and culture. Kenya during the 1980s, she relayed the following experiences to us about what ordination meant for her church in rural Kenya,

Carolyn Brock 25:09

Particularly in village areas, but I was speaking with a group of, of women actually men and women. And we had questions from the crowd as she asked, well, when will when will women be ordained in, in our church, and I'm going like, this was like, probably a couple of years before it came up as a thing in our body, but that just kind of stopped me like I had been raised quite, I took on a more demure kind of I had my own thoughts, but I think that I just sort of accepted all of that, that the men were the ones who were supposed to be in charge of these things and speak and do all the priesthood roles. So that that woke me somewhat and I think that allowed

me I was listening to other deconstructive voices about our history and the truth of everything that we had.

Lydia Gustafson 26:12

Carolyn's experience in Kenya allowed her to begin to rethink what it meant to have ordained ministers in her church, part of an evolution in perspective that will continue throughout her life, as we'll see in later episodes. And the third question, we focused on the roles and expectations women and men had within their church before women's ordination. Here our interviewees provided stories about the church in general, as well as their own personal experiences. Linda's told us about the general context, she shared that

Linda Booth 26:43

for ordination, typically women did women kind of things. They taught church school, they might have taught an adult class. They took care of women's roles in the congregation. The congregation and when I was a member during the more recent years right before our nation was very progressive. And so they had asked me on many occasions, to both give prayers during worship services, and even occasionally to speak my background was in public relations. And so speaking has always been one of the gifts I believe God has given me. And so that congregation understood giftedness, and use women in a variety of roles. One role they did not use women in was in the presiding role during the services, but typically nearly any other role other than participating in the sacraments was welcomed in that congregation.

Lydia Gustafson 27:48

Linda then expressed how this experience was not universal.

Linda Booth 27:53

I believe it was quite unique. There were a few families that would complain for example, if a woman was on the rostrum, but in general this congregation was very, very accepting. And I know that was unusual. It was in a Olathe Kansas, which is about 30 miles west of Independence, Missouri. And we were a very gifted congregation with a lot of young families. And and so therefore, I believe we had that ability to move and minister in a way that might not have been appreciated another congregations,

Lydia Gustafson 28:36

Becky Savage group in the Greater Kansas City area, she too reflected on some of the gender differences in church life before women's ordination.

Becky Savage 28:45

Women did pretty much everything in the in the congregation except serve the sacraments. So they were engaged in Sunday school class, there were active women's organizations have women's group. And they would be engaged in preparing worship services. So it was I was on the worship planning committee and help put worship services together. And they were engaged in music ministry, they were helping plan activities that went beyond so if we were in a stake in the central area called Kansas City steak, so we were engaged with industries in the



Kansas City stake as well, that we're taking our congregation members and helping them be more engaged in the bigger group, which was can see stake a group of other congregations. Men were engaged predominantly in priesthood ministry unless they were not ordained. Those who were not ordained. It depended on what level of commitment they wanted to provide in the congregation. If they were very active in volunteering, they could do whatever they wanted to do up to the limitation of not performing the sacraments, and to some extent, not presiding at a Sunday service. So that was pretty much limited to those in the high priest or an elder office, which were the men. And so it really now was in a much more, I would call liberal or more open than a congregation, which was much more accepting of whatever the giftedness of the individuals were, and however much they wanted to contribute. They were more than welcome to contribute in the congregation, which was wonderful and very, it allows for much more diversity of giftedness and carrying members as a whole.

Lydia Gustafson 30:58

Jane Gardner serves as the presiding evangelist for Community of Christ, an office that functions almost like a spiritual director for the entire church. But in the early 1980s, she was in her early 20s and a pastor's wife. She reflects on her involvement in the church as a pastor's wife, as well as the roles that she held in the church in her early teens.

Jane Gardner 31:17

My husband was pastor for, oh boy, 15 years maybe as a bivocational minister. He was a high school physics chemistry teacher. But then he was also ordained as an elder. So he was pastor and pastor's wife had its own job description, in terms of you know, if someone was sick or if it was somebody's birthday, or it was just there was some expectations for what the pastor's wife should be doing, which will always very interesting. And so that was a role I was always even from high school, even before high school junior high involved in worship and planning of worship and then music because music was my major. So lots of involvement in sacred music and that kind of thing.

Lydia Gustafson 32:14

Today we discuss the roles that women in men held before women's ordination and how their personal roles in the church changed over time. And our next episode we will look at the controversy surrounding women's ordination in the 1970s and 80s. As we'll see, changing the policy on women's ordination wasn't an easy process for Community of Christ Church, and many of our interviewees face significant adversity as they advocated for women's ordination.

That concludes our podcast for today. Special thanks to Carolyn Brock. Charmaine Chvala Smith. Linda Booth, Becky Savage and Jane Gardner. We'd also like to thank Dan Bennett, Travis Grandi and Yasmin Eisenhower of the Smith Learning, Research and Technology Team. Thanks to Rachel Killebrew of Community of Christ library archives, and thanks to the Andrew Mellon Foundation that supports public facing student writing at Smith College. Tune in next week on Women's Rights