

ES 71 | Women's Ordination in Community of Christ | The Controversy  
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 10:52

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, so

David Howlett 11:15

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 12:01

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

Naomi Brill 12:10

I'm Naomi.

Em Papineau 12:11

I'm Em.

Raleigh Williams 12:12

I'm Raleigh,

Unknown Speaker 12:13

We're your hosts for this episode of women's rights. This season we're exploring the story of women's ordination in Community of Christ, a church with a quarter of a million members formally named the reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or RLDS. This denomination began ordaining women in 1985. On the 35th anniversary of these first ordinations, we're taking this season 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 become leaders in Community of Christ.

Unknown Speaker 12:51

Each episode in this series investigates a different topic. Today we're going to look at the controversy over women's ordination. The issue first arose in 1970 at the RLDS World Conference, and the debate continued for 14 years, a survey taken in 1984 of our LDS members found that 32% of respondents were pro women's ordination 49% were against, and 13% were undecided. Based on these figures, it would seem that the church was decidedly not ready for women to be ordained.

Unknown Speaker 13:25

Yet, despite this section 156 was passed at the RLDS World Conference in 1984. Section 156 was more than just a piece of legislation. It was considered a revelation from the RLDS Prophet, but it had to have legislative approval from the churches delegates at the World Conference. This document implemented women's ordination and women were first ordained to the priesthood in 1985. despite opposition, we spoke with some ordained women about their experiences with the controversy,

Unknown Speaker 14:02

the first question that we asked these ordained women was this. Did you yourself ever question whether women should be ordained? Or were you always sure that it was the right thing to do? And how did you react to the news of Section 156?

Unknown Speaker 14:16

Just start, we'll hear from March Troeh, head of the RLDS women's department in the 1970s. She was at the forefront of the fight for women's ordination in the 1970s and 80s. When she started to think about the question of women's ordination in the 1950s, she was surprisingly ambivalen.,

Marge Troeh 14:34

I did not think about it at all I can remember in the late 1950s in Los Angeles area when my husband was in medical school, I was at a women's meeting. And it came up one night in our class discussion. And that's the first time I remember even talking about whether women should or should not be ordained, and it just at that point was not an issue for me. I wasn't against it. But it didn't seem like an important thing to me then.

Unknown Speaker 15:21

Though Marge was initially ambivalent, she went on to take a strong stance for women's ordination. Next we'll hear from Charmaine Chvala Smith. Charmaine is currently the chaplain at Community of Christ seminary at Graceland University. She felt strongly that women should be ordained after serving in important on ordained positions.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:43

But the more doors that kept being opened for me that shouldn't have been there. The more I really sensed that my desire to serve God and people was being honored in some way and so it felt like That was moving towards, it felt like that thing I was sensing inside that stirring was accurate. I was feeling like that was being validated as more doors open for me to do these things. So, by the time section 156 have passed in the World Conference in 84. I would say it by that point I was, I felt quite quite strongly that I was responding to God's call, I still wasn't sure if that would result in ordination for me.

Unknown Speaker 16:46

So, Charmaine was sure that women should be our date, but she wasn't sure that she should be ordained. And if she wasn't, she was happy to serve as an example of how women could participate in an ordained ministry. Still, she was part of the first group of ordained women in 1985.

Unknown Speaker 17:02

While Marge and Charmaine came to support women's ordination over time, some had a more regulatory experience such as Linda booth. Linda was the president of the Council of 12 apostles in Community of Christ until she retired last year. She had a dream that to find her position on the issue.

Linda Booth 17:20

And this story that I'm going to tell you sounds pretty mystical. I wouldn't consider myself a mystical person. And I don't have a lot of dreams. But I had this peculiar dream about five years before the revelation was given. And in that dream, an elderly man who am I considered elderly at the time, named Marvin who lived in Ottawa Kansas, was in my dream and he said to me, that he believed someday women would be called to the priesthood and in particular, I would be called, she went on to say, Well, I had gone back to school at the University of Kansas, driving from alafia, Kansas five days a week to finish my degree. in Journalism and Mass Communication, and when I was pulling into the parking lot on April 3 1984, I heard announced on the radio that during the World Conference or the International Conference in Independence, Missouri, that the President of the church had given a revelation that women would be called a priesthood. And I sat there in the parking lot and I cried, I thought, Oh, my goodness, it's going to happen.

Unknown Speaker 18:39

So each of these women had a unique perspective on this issue, even though each of them would eventually be ordained. There was just as much variation in opinions among the members of their congregations. We wanted to know more, so we asked a few more questions. Did you find that male leaders in your local congregation were generally for or against women's ordination? Whatever Women, how did friends and family in the church respond to the controversy?

Unknown Speaker 19:05

Marge, who we heard from earlier, was in a supportive congregation, but always saw some backlash among other congregations in her area.

Marge Troeh 19:14

Very we live here in Independence, which is the center, center place that's often called. And it's where the headquarters is. There are more congregations here in Independence than anywhere, and so it really varied congregation by congregation. I was in a quite supportive congregation. But our congregations were then organized into stakes. And when women were first called in our stake, they were rejected when others were included in the vote, but it was

also skewed vote, people came across the lines to fight against the ordination of women. But in my particular congregation, there was support.

Unknown Speaker 20:11

While Marjorie's congregation was supportive. Some women faced rejection from within their own congregations, and even within their own families. Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue was one of the first African American women to be ordained in Community of Christ. Today she serves on the Standing High Council, a group of high priest who present and approve policies for the denomination as a whole. She told us about her close experience with direct opposition.

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 20:38

When the call came I only shared it with my then husband. I didn't take it outside of our immediate family. He, he was opposed. As I watched the process because I would have been a part of it first wave had I accepted at the moment, but it was a year later before within a year because you only had a certain amount of time and then you had to let them know something. So just short of a year I had watched the trauma that affected the church, overall, with people leaving people refusing to be ministered to by women, but none of that occurred within the congregation I attended.

Unknown Speaker 21:32

Some ordained women were sympathetic towards those who disagreed with their ordination. Carolyn Brock was serving Community of Christ in Kenya during the 1980s. She would later serve in the office of peace and justice and then integrated formation ministries until she retired in 2010. She reflected on why she thought many broke apart from the denomination to form independent congregations. These groups are called restorationist groups.

Carolyn Brock 21:57

Some of them are conservative congregation Were resisting, rebelling, refusing to do this. And it was, I think that things perhaps were not handled real well. Really very well at that time. Maybe some more harsh like, Okay, well, we're just going to shut you guys down. And then those congregations tended to go off and become kind of offshoot groups that are still functioning some of them restoration groups.

Unknown Speaker 22:25

Charmaine met those who opposed women's ordination with compassion and understanding.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:31

And and you could just see people struggling and not because they were mean or mean spirited or, or knowingly sexist, but because this was a lot. This was a lot to deal with in their image of who God was, and what the church was about. And, I mean, he could kind of say, Well, if we're saying now that ordaining women is okay, that means we didn't get it right earlier. And how could we be the one true church for those We're still hanging on to that. How can we be the one true church if we didn't get it right earlier? So we must have been right earlier. And so we can't go forward with with this.

Unknown Speaker 23:10

Similar questions and issues were reverberating throughout American culture during this time. So how did this Community of Christ specific narrative fit within its broader social context? To find out more? We asked each ordained women, Do you consider yourself a feminist? Do you think that the wider social context, second wave feminism in the era, etc, influenced the movement for women's ordination? If so, how?

Unknown Speaker 23:40

Carolyn, who we heard from earlier about restorationist groups explained how the social context prompted women in the church to ask big questions.

Carolyn Brock 23:48

And yes, I think that the ERA in women's rights and feminism and all of those things impacted our whole denomination, particularly the women who are older than I am. Some of whom are still alive and are my heroes. Barbara Howard, Marge Troeh, some of the women who were first ordained and had to put up with a lot of that hassle, and they have definitely been forward thinkers in and it worked in women's ministries for the church and promote it some of these thoughts and had actually posed questions to the dominant denomination like why isn't this happening? What's our problem here? And they had stirred up some of the all male leaders of the church to look at this issue and to pose the question as to why is this wrong? Why isn't this an equal rights thing?

Unknown Speaker 24:45

Jane Gardner is the presiding evangelist in Community of Christ and is the first woman to serve in this position. Before women's ordination. Her position had been called presiding patriarch. In this office, she offers spiritual counsel To the church as a whole, she felt that the movement in the church was more subtle than the wider social movement. But women's ordination was definitely influenced by its context.

Jane Gardner 25:11

So, I do consider myself a feminist. I don't. I'm not a in my day in the 1960s and 70s, it would have been called a bra burner. I don't consider myself that blatant about it. But I certainly advocated for it, she continued. So yeah, I think things that were happening in the 60s and 70s, with the women's movement were important. I do think they had an influence on on the church, but I don't remember it being a really blatant like there were no marches or anything like that. In terms of how people felt about it.

Unknown Speaker 26:03

Charmaine was adamant that women's ordination was a direct result of the second wave feminist movement. Even today, Charmaine argues that controversies within the LDS church are far from over. There are always new barriers to break in regard to inclusion and leadership

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:22



We deeply, deeply indebted to the cultural needs around us, particularly at that time, but but today as well, our our ability to, to be able to move maybe not as quickly as I would like, but fairly quickly on issues of ordination and marriage for gay and lesbian, same same gender couples was partly to because the society was able to start talking about it and and create that arena in Which we could as a church see some of our blind spots and say, No, we we believe in the worth of all persons and we believe that all are called by God to ministries of different kinds. So, so, yeah. So that what happened then, in the 80s with ordination of women, was essential for many of the other changes that follow.

Unknown Speaker 27:26

From Linda Booth to Charmaine-Chvala Smith. It is apparent that section 156 and the controversies which came with it, affected women in the RLDS Church deeply and uniquely, some women talked about how they went from ambivalent to pro women's ordination over time, while others had single moments that defined their perspective on the issue. Well, some women had supportive families and congregations, others face painful opposition from other church members and loved ones. Additionally, they all consider themselves feminists to varying degrees. Maybe armchair means concluding thoughts. The passing of Section 156 was just the tip of the iceberg in the fight for full inclusion for all in Community of Christ.

Unknown Speaker 28:22

In the next episode, we'll be talking about what it is like to be called to the priesthood.

Unknown Speaker 28:30

That concludes our podcast for today. Special thanks to Marge tro Charmaine Chvala Smith, Linda Booth, Gwendolyn Hawks Blue, Carolyn Brock, and Jane Gardner. Also thanks to 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.

Unknown Speaker 29:03

Tune in next time on women's rights.

Josh Mangelson 29:28

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