

ES 72 | Women's Ordination in Community of Christ | The Call
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,

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 11:52

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

Unknown Speaker 12:03

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

Peyton 12:18

Hi, I'm Peyton.

Becca 12:21

I'm Becca.

Unknown Speaker 12:22

We're your host for this episode of Women's Rights. This season, we're exploring the story of women's ordination and Community of Christ, a church with a quarter million members informally named 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're taking this season to look back on the journey towards women's ordination and 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 the Community of Christ.

Unknown Speaker 12:59

Each epoch in this series investigates a different topic. And today we're going to look at the call to the priesthood. We asked these women about the actual moment of their calling, what it means to be called and why they chose to accept their calling. We also asked about some of the challenges of being called and received some incredible stories in response.

Unknown Speaker 13:17

For first question, we asked, what does it mean to be called to the priesthood? And why did you personally choose to accept the call

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:25

in our denomination it started, it starts in a different place, really. I mean, the individual may be open to the idea that there there may be a call, whether it's an ordained call or not. And so that part of what our discipleship is, is about being open to what God might be calling us to. But for our nation, the call has to be originated from the pastor. And so part of the pastor's role, the the elder in charge of the congregation, the pastor is is to discern where Those people in the congregation that God may be calling to specific roles, so those ordained roles. And so the pastor discerns, where there might be a call for someone, and then sends that call up up the chain as far as the administrative chain, and then sends it like to the mission center president or to world church. To make sure First of all, that there aren't any concerns about this person.

Unknown Speaker 14:29

This description comes from shimming Charles Smith, who was among the first wave of women who were ordained in 1985. Charmaine on to describe her own call. So,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:41

it turns out that the person who processed my call the pastor who process that actually even submitted it before they were supposed to submit them. And because he's felt very strongly about that and because you kind of had to wait Wait for the pastor to come and tell you that you had a call, it was kind of seen as bad form to tell anybody that you might be feeling like you're going to be called to some ordained office, because it would look like you're, you're wanting it you're wanting this power, this recognition or whatever. So

Unknown Speaker 15:19

another description of the meaning behind being called to the priesthood comes from Jane Gardner, who has held several roles and most recently serves as presiding evangelist offering spiritual counsel to the church as a whole.

Jane Gardner 15:34

So for us, in, in the light of the phrase that I said to you all are called according to their gifts. So it's important in our denomination that not only that it's kind of a three legged stool, not only does the person feel a call within themselves, but they're jurisdictional leaders would sense a call. And then the congregation itself always votes to support a call. So there's like three parts to that. So that's kind of the, the process.

Unknown Speaker 16:19

On a more personal note, Marge Choa, who served as the director of women's ministry for the LDS Church in the 1970s, and early 80s, describes the events that surrounded her own call.

Marge Troeh 16:29

My call was very unique. I was not among the first called. And that was important because of the role that I had played at the world church. It definitely It was not about me, and trying to get me or deigned, and so forth. It was about broadening the ministry that occurred in the

church. And so, yeah, one of the things that the women's Commission had worked on was a definition of ministry. Mm hmm. And we defined it as perceiving a need, and responding to that need in such a way that God's purposes are fulfilled. And that way things you do in the community become ministry, things you do in your home things in the job, as well as things in the church associated with ordinances. And we really wanted to broaden the definition of ministry. I served for the church on the National Board of church women united when we became participating in the nomination nationally. I represented the church there. And so I attend many meetings of the board and executive committee and so forth. I had different roles there and they walk the walk with me they heard the stories of our struggles. There were women from all different denominations, they had all different stances on ordination and so forth. Many of them have been ordaining women for a long time. But many of them it seemed, was very token, we worked to that broader definition of ministry. So, when women were ordained, you know, when that revelation came, that was in 1984. I have served until 1982, on the world church level, and then it became very obvious to me that I did need to resign, that things would not move forward as long as I was there because I was perceived by some as too pushy or as as a stumbling block, I don't know. And it became with some that they couldn't even hear what I was saying on any subject without focus, focusing it back into for women. Sure. And so I resigned in 1980 to 1984 when the revelation came. I was amazed. I knew it would come sometime, but I did not expect it to be that soon. And so I was amazed. I was thrilled. They shared it at World Conference. I got home that afternoon and the phone started ringing off the wall, with calls from my ecumenical friends from all over the country from all different faiths

Unknown Speaker 19:59

building on this level, Question. The next section that we're moving into deals with personal reactions to being called to the priesthood. Many of the women described the experiences emotional and humbling. But some gave detailed stories about the moment that they first realized they were called to the priesthood.

Marge Troeh 20:16

I knew sometime, my call would come. Well, I said I was on the National Board of church, women united. I was on their ecumenical development team. And we were having a team meeting. Tried to have in New York and it did not work out for travel for accommodations for various things. I suggested they come to Independence, Missouri, they could be housed in the local unit, members homes, they could meet at my house. So that was arranged on they were going to be there on Thursday through Sunday. On Wednesday, the day before. I got a phone call from my pastor. As soon as I heard his voice, I went, Oh, no, not now. I have forest, a mop and bits to make and things to set up, you know? But I thought, well, I thought, all right. I can pray while I'm mopping floors, I can because he and the fellow with him wanted to own this counselors wanted to come over that night and talk to me. And I knew then that it was to present a call. He came in and he saw there in the dining room, the easel setup and the big table and everything. And he said, What is going on? And I told him about the meeting of women from all these faiths that we're going to be at my house and he said, That's wonderful.

Do you think they could come to church and worship with us on Sunday morning? Because I'd like to present your call van. And have you respond to it.

Unknown Speaker 22:12

That story, again, was from Marge Choa, who served on the National Board of church in the united and resigned just two years before being called. Another story comes from Linda booth who has served in different roles since the calling that she describes here.

Linda Booth 22:26

And so the pastor of our congregation called me and asked me to have lunch with him at a place called tip ins that serve this delicious homemade pie. And I remember thinking, this pastor had never asked me to do anything, I'd always been asked by other people to participate in services. And he reminded me of my grandfather. And so I had this kind of strange sense of wonder about this man. So when he invited me to have lunch with him, I thought, Oh, my goodness, maybe he's gonna call me to the previous So we sat there during lunch. And instead of calling me to the priesthood, he said, Linda, I believe you've been running for priesthood. And as a result of that, I'm not calling you. And I just sat there. And I cried, and I said, I'm sorry if there's been anything I've done to disturb you. That has never been my intent. And when I came home, I told my husband, Doug, and he was furious. And he said, You can't give a non priesthood call. That's just not right. And first of all, I need to tell you that the, the man who gave me the non priesthood call, eventually gave me my priesthood call. And he met in our living room. And he said, I I know that God has a call to you to serve as an elder. He said, I know you You know that I've struggled with your call. He said, You've always been on the forefront of women's ministry. And he said to me, that has always made me very uncomfortable. I had led a congregational retreat. And during that retreat, they had a guest minister, a minister from the International Church who came. And he told my pastor, he said, Linda has a call. I hope you recognize that. And so my pastor said, he began to pray about it and realize that I did have a call. So when he shared the call with me, I immediately said yes, because of the experiences that I had had in the past, knowing that God had called me and that I was to be prepared to accept that call. Now, that was my first call to elder then about a year and a half later, I was called to serve as as a counselor. The High Priests quorum I was called as the high priest and Community of Christ, which has different priesthood roles. And that call I was able to answer quickly and say yes to and felt that call. My call to apostle was a very different experience. And in 1994 I had gone to the International Conference in Independence, Missouri, where they were dedicating the temple. And at that dedication service, there was so many people there, some watched it in the temple, and others of us watched it in the auditorium via the television screen. And as I was walking in the corridor of that place, with lots of people packed together from all over the world, speaking different languages, I had this idea that came into my mind I can't really describe Ride. I say it was a voice but it wasn't a voice. But it was a knowledge that came to me and it was you need to begin to prepare to serve as my apostle.

Unknown Speaker 26:11

Unlike the last two stories, Shameen Charles Smith gave a personal anecdote that will likely resonate with many listeners in this section, Charmaine struggled to reconcile her ideas of what ordained ministry looks like with her own calling.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:23

I had, you know, I'm seeing, you know, men and in dark suits and white shirts, and a tie, you know, which is like, I can't do that. And, and so it was like, I really had to come face to face with some of my own inherited and embedded ideas of what ministry, what ordained ministry look like. And I'm just thankful for that. But it was it was both, you know, on the one hand, Oh, I can't be that. And then on the other hand, saying, Well, why would I think that's what I need to be in order to be an ordained minister, but it was kind of embarrassing on the one hand to realize that was still there. These images of male nurses as being normative for ordination.

Unknown Speaker 27:08

Charmaine story offers a great transition into the third question that we asked our interviewees as she came to terms with her internal struggle to support her own calling. Many of the newly ordained women faced both support and opposition from their communities. For third and final question, we asked, How did people around you react to your call and subsequent ordination? Where did you find support and where did you find out position? here two stories from Becky Savage and Gwendolyn Hawks Blue.

Becky Savage 27:38

A lot of support from my mom who was ordained early, so she was like in 1986. And obviously had a female pastor. So there was support there. We had two women in my congregation who were ordained early and that 1985 86 ish timeframe and we had strong women leaders. In our steak, so there was good leadership mentors that way.

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 28:05

When the call came, I only share that with my 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 that 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. In fact, I had a woman who was a convert to the church, who, unaware of course, that I had been called and said, you know, you are going to be called. And I felt that was an affirmation of the call, and certainly took it as support.

Unknown Speaker 29:22

For our final quote, we have a story of interfaith and inter family support from Carolyn Brock, you served her husband in Kenya at the time of this story. Both of them had completed coursework at Notre Dom University before going to serve in Kenya.

Carolyn Brock 29:35

My husband was very supportive. Our and it was interesting how our Catholic friends several of the Catholic priests and brothers who were really close to out of our Notre Dame course, lived in Nairobi, and came and honored that process for me and very excited for me, and I found that interesting because when Still in their tradition are not allowed to have to serve as priests. I think that the some of them personally disagreed with that. And they didn't directly say that very much or very often, but I found a lot of support from from them. And

Unknown Speaker 30:23

today we've heard from several of the first women in the world to be ordained to the priesthood in the Community of Christ. We heard the different ways women and Community of Christ received their call and some of the challenges they faced from within their congregations and beyond. We thank these women for sharing their stories with us, and shedding light on what it means to be called to the priesthood and how it shapes their lives. In our next episode, we'll hear from women reflecting upon the first sacraments they administered and further address the challenges they faced one through eight

Unknown Speaker 30:59

conclusion Our podcast for today. Special thanks to Sherman charlo Smith, Jane Gardner Marge troma, Linda booth, Becky savage Gwendolyn hawks blue and Carolyn Brock. Also, thanks to Dan Bennett, Travis grandi and Yasmin Eisenhower of the Smith learning research and technology team. Thanks to Rachel kobu of Community of Christ library archives, and thanks to the Andrew Mellon Foundation that supports public facing student writing at Smith College you tune in next time on women's rights.

Josh Mangelson 31:48

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