

ES 73 | Women's Ordination in Community of Christ | Congregational Ministry
Project Zion Podcast

Katie Langston 0:17

You're listening to an Extra Shot episode on the Project Zion podcast, a shorter episode that lets you get your Project Zion fix in between our following episodes. It might be shorter timewise but hopefully not in content. So regardless of the temperature at which you prefer your caffeine, sit back and enjoy this Extra Shot. So regardless of the temperature at which you prefer your caffeine, sit back and enjoy this extra shot. So regardless of the temperature at which you prefer your caffeine, sit back and enjoy this extra shot.

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 11:17

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.

Madeleine Hickman 12:02

Hi, I'm Madeleine.

Nevia Selmon 12:04

I'm Nevia.

Jennie Mathewson 12:05

And I'm Jennie .

We're your hosts for this episode of women's rights. This season we're exploring the story of women's ordination in the Community of Christ, a church with a quarter million members and formally called 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'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 be leaders in Community with Christ.

Nevia Selmon 12:45

Each episode in this series investigates a different topic, and today we're going to look at congregational ministry, specifically the first sacraments these women administered and other important exercises in their local ministry.

Jennie Mathewson 13:04

Women one that are dating to Community of Christ priesthood were often supported by their families, friends and the churches more progressive congregations who encourage their calls. But within a largely supportive community, many still had disconcerting experiences with others who questioned their right to the priesthood as women. Linda Booth recalled one of

these encounters, which has been mentioned before but helps to understand the adversity faced in local congregations.

Linda Booth 13:33

I'm going to tell you experience it was very disconcerting to me. So when women started being receiving calls in our congregation, there were about five or six, maybe seven women who received calls. And I remember being so excited as I began to hear about their calls. And because I had had that question I wondered about myself. And so the pastor of our congregation called me and asked me to have lunch with him. I thought, my goodness, maybe he's gonna call me to the priesthood. 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.

Jennie Mathewson 14:51

She felt hurt and confused about what her role was within the church.

Linda Booth 14:56

And when it was time to take the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I couldn't reach for the emblems because I felt so broken.

Jennie Mathewson 15:05

Other women like Becky Savage had much less openly hostile encounters, but still noticed markedly different behavior from a few people just after her ordination.

Becky Savage 15:15

When I was first ordained in the in the congregation, the first congregation here in the Kansas City area. We had one gentleman who was very opposed to women in priesthood. First time I preached he got up and left. That's kind of like okay? But most everyone else was supportive. I had a very supportive family. So you have a very supportive family and spouse who's extremely supportive, those things just outweigh many others.

Nevia Selmon 15:48

Next, we asked, What did it mean to you on a personal level to administer your first sacrament? Was it different from what you anticipated? Many women were were uncertain and worried about how to perform their first sacraments. They started questioning the whole process and became overwhelmed by their opportunity to take part as an officiant. However, upon administering a sacrament, they felt a stronger spiritual connection with God.

Jane Gardner 16:17

So there were many sacraments to learn as a new priesthood member. I think communion was probably the first that I did and like I said, it was daunting because I would have thought I, I would know exactly how to do it, and I didn't I it was just like, Oh my gosh, how can this be?

Nevia Selmon 16:38

Gardeners experience with questioning her first sacrament, performing communion was similar to Carolyn Brock's for a sacrament of a baptism. Carolyn Brock, unlike Jane Gardner, was serving as a priesthood member in Kenya.

Carolyn Brock 16:54

And I was going to be part of the three person team who was going to do that. So I remember being very worried that is, Is this real? Do I have the ability to do this? How do I know I'm connecting with God or I don't even know these people's names. I don't speak their language.

Nevia Selmon 17:17

Brock's nerves led to her many questions on whether she was prepared to perform the sacrament. Booth dealt with her worries by writing out her sermon to prepare for her first time preaching after being ordained.

Linda Booth 17:30

Well, I had planned the service for four weeks. And for me to stand up for my first time as a newly ordained elder and preach was a little daunting to me and I wanted a lot of time, and I like to be prepared. And and so I remember sitting down and writing out my sermon putting on three by five cards on Saturday. While the kids played I stood in front of the mirror and I practice with the three by five cards. I went to church on Sunday morning, I put the cards in my pocket, I thought As I'm standing there before the service, which we typically do to have prayer before the service begins, I put my hand into my pocket feel the assurance of those cards, and I left the cards at home. And so I remember walking down to the pulpit and sitting there and literally trembling, because this would be the first time I spoke, and presided in this congregation, and while they loved me and supported me, I was very concerned.

Nevia Selmon 18:33

Despite the support and love from her congregation, the honor of performing her first sacrament brought Linda Booth much stress. Booth ended up forgetting her note cards at home, but she felt that God helped guide her through the entire sermon. After that she never used prepared cards while preaching again. Becky Savage felt similar stressors when holding the plate during her first time, sir communion.

Becky Savage 19:00

I can remember the first time just serving communion. When you watch communion being served, it just looks so simple. But when you're the one holding the plate, there's all different experience about, Okay. Now, health, How close do you hold it? And do you help people? How do you help people etc. So those that you know, the first time you do things, trying to figure out

your particular role as the minister providing the actual sacrament is, it's a different experience, and very much a learning experience.

Nevia Selmon 19:39

Charmaine shares a similar experience in serving her first communion to Becky when performing her first sacrament.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:47

It was something that I was doing for the sake of the body, and not for my own romanticized ideas of what it should feel like. So that was probably a really good beginning to think about what ministry is about because, you know, it's too easy for it to be about us. And you know how we feel about ourselves and all that.

Nevia Selmon 20:09

These ordained women were humbled in this position and could feel God's power throughout the act of performing the sacrament. Jane Gardner remarks on some interesting experiences she had after being ordained. She and many other ordained women were able to baptize their daughters and nieces.

Jane Gardner 20:28

I got to some cool things after I was first or day and I was, I was able to baptize my daughter. So that was an interesting ability to be able to do something like that actually helped ordain my husband to another priesthood office.

Nevia Selmon 20:50

Carolyn Brock had adaptive spiritual experiences when performing her first sacraments and noted the energy she felt between God and those with She was administering,

Carolyn Brock 21:03

I felt very much this kind of flow of energy down through and over me and up from the person and kind of like a layer of warm energy or something. I don't know how you would just say that. But it was very, I felt very deeply moved and almost to tears at times of just sensing that God knew each one of these people and they might be the anonymous poor to most people.

Madeleine Hickman 21:38

While the first of the sacraments administered by these women left lasting impressions, all of the women we spoke to for this project have had other memorable priesthood experiences since then, their positions and their local congregations allow them to have many meaningful interactions with those around them that they've been called to serve. For Gardner. Her ministry for her congregation involved much work as she was asked to juggle the duties of many roles.

Jane Gardner 22:01

So in the local congregation, I was doing things like I was the worship leader or the and or the song music leader. I was teaching children. I was preaching there are Sunday, there were Sundays in our small congregation when I was actually sitting at the organ playing, and then I'd have to go up to the podium to preach and then go back to the organ and play.

Madeleine Hickman 22:30

Brock who administered in Kenya for a while, during her early ministry, found that certain sacraments she performed felt uniquely special.

Carolyn Brock 22:40

I think in the Africa years, anytime that I engaged in teaching or leading or sacraments that involve touch in particular, there was always this very humbling sense of presence, and boy See, and also an awareness of people's potential.

Madeleine Hickman 23:08

Until 1994, the RLDS Church practiced closed communion, meaning only those baptized in their church could partake in communion. However, with a policy change in 1994, all Christians, regardless of church membership could take communion. Savage told us about an experience involving a longtime attendee of her congregation after this policy change.

Becky Savage 23:31

We'd had a spouse of one of our members who had faithfully sat through all of our Sunday services including our communion and had the plate pass him by every first Sunday of the month because he was not a member. Although a Christian, and the first Sunday, when I could offer him to plate a bread and wine was a very meaningful experience. It just, that ability to bring inclusion of a very faithful member of our congregation was so significant, and that's congregational ministry. And for he and his wife, his wife and him both and for all of the members of the congregation. It was made a special day for him because we could all bring him into the congregation as a whole. It's a very meaningful day.

Madeleine Hickman 24:28

The dutiful service offered by these women to their local congregations and family affected both the women administering the sacraments and those being administered to gardener reflecting on the time spent serving said,

Jane Gardner 24:40

It's not easy, but it to me, it really is what the congregational ministry is all about is, is being available to the community, to offer sacrament to offer support.

Madeleine Hickman 24:57

The mixed reactions women often got when they begin their work in the priesthood could be disheartening. But the experience of performing sacraments as members of the priesthood gave so many of them a distinct feeling that they were fulfilling their duty to God. Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue who is currently the Co-leader of the diversity and inclusion team and Community

of Christ spoke about the sense of responsibility she felt during her first sacraments administered.

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 25:20

It came with a deep sense of responsibility to represent God's love in that situation. I would think that will be an opportunity for all of us who are members as a priesthood member, it offered deeper dimension to be all that I could be in that role as a servant to know that for some particular task involved, I was the representative for Christ is amazing, and tremendously, tremendously humbling.

Madeleine Hickman 26:15

This sense of responsibility and deep humility felt by Hawks Blue was not unique. All the women interviewed for this project testified of the importance of their callings. Marge Troeh who served for a time as the Commissioner of women's ministry in the 1970s dedicated her focus to maximizing the ministry that could be done before women were ordained in 1985.

Marge Troeh 26:35

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.

Madeleine Hickman 26:47

This theme of selfless service is echoed and shivalik Smith's response when asked about what it meant to administer her for sacraments.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:59

I think that whole idea that, it reinforced The idea that this is about service, rather than about what my own feelings are. And that's been helpful in lots of ways just because I think we're a society that's, that's kind of addicted to feelings, and equating feelings to reality, and actually performing the sacraments. You're recognizing a different reality than just your feelings at the time.

Madeleine Hickman 27:28

Remember back to the instant Booth shared about her non call to the priesthood. Here is how she finished that story.

Linda Booth 27:35

And I went home and I set sat on my bed and I was crying, and I was crying out to God. And all of a sudden these words came to me and it was like do not allow your hurts and frustrations to separate you from the people that you are called to serve. And those words remain in my mind because I I've pulled on them many times in my life depended upon them.

Unknown Speaker 28:01

She shared with us what it means to her to hold the priesthood

Linda Booth 28:04

Carrying priesthood is nuss not something cool to do, or an honor that you've been given
priesthood is a gift and calling from God for the benefit of the people. And so, in order to focus
on what the people need, you need to be connected to divine power so that you can lead in
such a way that there will be a benefit but also a transformation not only in the congregation,
but in the lives of the people you serve.

Madeleine Hickman 28:41

Well, the first experiences of sacraments and priesthood calls for these women may not have
been completely stress and pain free. They testified that the most important thing when it
comes to ministering sacrament is using God's power to strengthen and meet the needs of
those around you

Next episode we will be expanding on the topic of women's experiences in ministry and
Community of Christ to discuss experiences of denominational ministry, stories from the
national and international levels of the church. That concludes our podcasts for today. A special
thanks to Gwendolyn Hawkes blue Charmaine chavalla Smith, Linda booth, Marge tro, Jane
Gardner, Carolyn Brock and Becky Savage. Also, thanks to Dan Bennett, Travis grandi and
Yasmin Eisenhower of the Smith learning research technology team. Thanks to our professor
David Howlett for making this possible. Thanks to Rachel Killebrew of committee of price library
archives, and thanks to the Andrew Mellon Foundation that supports public facing student
writing as well.

Josh Mangelson 30:04

Thanks for listening to Project Zion Podcast, subscribe to our podcast on Apple podcast,
Stitcher, or whatever podcast streaming service you use. And while you're there give us a five
star rating. projects I am podcast is sponsored by Latter-day Seeker Ministries of Community of
Christ. The views and opinions expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not
necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Latter-day Seeker Ministries or Community of
Christ. Music has been graciously provided by Dave Heinze.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>