

ES 75 | Women's Ordination in Community of Christ | Denominational Ministry
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 3:05

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 6:41

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 11:12

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.

Sophia Johnson 12:01

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

Julia Batson 12:12

Hi, I'm Julia.

Sophia Johnson 12:14

I'm Sofia.

Tessa Perry 12:15

And I'm Tessa. We're your host for this episode of woman's rights.

Unknown Speaker 12:19

This season we are exploring the story of women's ordination in the Community of Christ, a church with a quarter million members and formerly 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're taking this season to look back on the journey towards women's ordination in the 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 the community of Christ.

Unknown Speaker 12:51

Each episode in this series investigates a different topic, and today, we're going to look at denominational ministry. We will feature Women reflecting on their ministry outside of the local conferences, retreats, international leadership gatherings and leadership of denominational bodies and hear their memorable stories.

Unknown Speaker 13:11

We first asked her interviewees about the roles in which they have served the Community of Christ, the denominational level, Charmaine Chvala-Smith talked a bit about her role as an evangelist.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:21

And then I think it was 2010 I was ordained as an evangelist, which is a minister who brings blessing. And that comes in personal blessing. We have what's called an evangelist blessing, which is it has several parts to it, but the idea is that we offer prayer for a person and the different elements in their life. Perhaps bringing some insight to them. The way I do it is I usually meet with a person once a month for at least a year and when talk about their spiritual life. So I'm kind of acting as a spiritual director to them in that time, and we discuss their spiritual journey. And then at the end of that time, or sometimes it goes much longer than a year. Then I, we, I record a prayer, and I lay my hands on their head and offer a prayer of blessing. And that's recorded and then transcribed for them.

Unknown Speaker 14:27

Jane Gardner provided some insight on what the holding the role of high priests signifies in the Community of Christ.

Jane Gardner 14:33

I was ordained a high priest. And the difference is that in the office of high priest, you're more looking at the world, church, the global church, and starting to understand how we make a global community and helping people understand that there's more to life than just inside their small congregation. That there's things outside of it.

Unknown Speaker 15:01

Jane spoke more about her experience serving in the denomination on a global level.

Jane Gardner 15:06

Since 2007, I've been on world church leadership council. So that's about 25 people who are the decision makers, the policy holders, the policy creators for the whole world church. And so that's been a role I've had now since 2007. And I'm, I'm one of several women. So we've tried as leaders, we've tried really hard to diversify. So there are there are women on the council. There are also people from Africa, people from Honduras, people from Wales. What am I forgetting? Honduras, Africa, oh, from French Polynesia. There's a woman from French Polynesia, so it's pretty, it's getting more and more diverse. And it's exciting time to be not just a woman but to be helping in the leadership of the denomination.

Unknown Speaker 16:13

We went on to ask interviewees to share a memorable experience. They had a denominational conference retreat or other event, Charmaine spoke about the support system, she found among other ordained women at conferences.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:24

That was one of those things that especially from about 85 to 95 was really important is that ordained women with seek each other out at these kinds of things, at conferences at Mission center conferences or, you know, family camps. And so there was this, this kind of sense of we can support each other. And among the women who were being ordained, there were some who were very traditional As in, you know, their role, their thinking of the role is primarily in home and family. And so for some of them, this was a, this was a big stretch for them and there was a real hesitance, but they felt that it was a an honest call, and they had embraced it. And so there was lots of holding each other up.

Unknown Speaker 17:21

Linda booth recounted a time when she organized a groundbreaking event of bonding with restoration branch congregations in Kansas City, who do not support women's ordination.

Linda Booth 17:31

Congregations in the greater Kansas City area that remained in Community of Christ but did not allow for women to be ordained in their congregations. And those pastors were attending to and so we sat there and talked, we prayed together. We talked, it was a great conversation. And the restoration elder looked at me said, Linda, you know, I like you. And I said, Well, I like you too. He said, I said, Would you like to continue to meet and he said, Yes, I I think that would be good. So I started a group called the restoration reconciliation committee. And once a month we met and these were restoration men, elders, and we got up to be about 30 to 35, that met and I heard the pain of these men who had been in some cases, silenced in the church because of their hateful attitudes or women in the priesthood. And we began to be come friends, we prayed together, and we decided to have a worship service because the Restorationists and Community of Christ couldn't worship together any longer because they didn't believe in women in ordination and, and the the schism was so wide that even family members never worshiped together after that. So we thought, let's have a restoration hymn festival. And we'll focus on Jesus Christ. That's what we have in common. And so we were there were only a couple places they would agree to have this service, and so we agreed to do it in the auditorium, which is independence which holds 6600 people. And on the night that we gathered for their restoration hymn festival, where men and women both participated in leading prayers and scripture. When I walked in, I was shocked. And that evening, they counted and there were almost 4000 people there. They had driven as far away as Michigan and all over the United States to come and worship together, because they had not had that experience. So I find it really astounding that a female apostle would have the experience of working with restoration elders, to bring together people so that they could worship together for the first time after a very long time

Unknown Speaker 19:58

in 2007 Becky Savage was the first woman ordained in Community of Christ's First Presidency, the highest leadership group in the church. She told us another emotional story about the

moment she was recognized in that office, along with other women being ordained to be denominational leaders of that Community of Christ World Conference,

Becky Savage 20:19

They read this, this into the record. And he so he reads this out to the first presidency, or to the whole world conference, which was, this is in that chamber that seats 6000 people that this is all the delegates that gather from around the world church. And this was in March of 2007. "We celebrate with all the Sisters of the church, another step in the long journey towards equal regard and opportunity in the church and in society. While this is not the final step, it is a significant step. From this point forward, there should be no question Or hesitancy regarding the appropriateness or capacity of women to serve in any leadership, or ministerial role in the church at any level of church organization. We will look forward to serving you to the best of our ability as we fulfill the duties and functions of the First Presidency. But first, let us pause now and express appreciation and respect for all the women who looked forward to the day and worked for this day, and sacrificed for this day before it ever seemed possible, that a day such as this could happen."

Unknown Speaker 21:45

Finally, our interviewees stress and experiences of backlash and exclusion they face at conferences and retreats to to their gender, that he reflected on a particularly hurtful experience as a new member of the First Presidency. Not long after ordination, a contrast the joyful moment you just heard.

Becky Savage 22:01

Members of the First Presidency of which there were three, president and two counselors and one of the counselors to the president of the church that were considered the presidency. So when there are assignments out, we try to share those assignments and one of the kinds of assignments that we take your when there's big celebrations of church, there was a congregation, I won't say where that was celebrating a big significant like 100 and 30th year of that congregation, and they generally would have a member of the First Presidency come for that celebration. President Veazey had been scheduled for that he had a conflict, President Shaw was the second member of the presidency was not available. And so they offered that I could come and I was free to come. And usually both for those kinds of assignments you get a call from, if not the pastor, the mission center president to say this is what we'd like you to do for that day. And we're happy to have you come was getting like a week, 10 days before that event, and I've not heard anything. And so I called the mission center president and said, I haven't heard anything What's going on? And now all I got was ummm, ummm. And I said, Okay, is there an issue because I'm a female? And I got, oh, yes.

Unknown Speaker 23:29

Becky also wasn't afraid to stand up for equal treatment of ordained women. She disclosed one particularly amusing moment of confrontation after receiving a demeaning remark.

Becky Savage 23:40

So, the first part of that conference, we have a receiving line as a first presidency where people can come greet us. One gentleman came through that line and his comment was, I'm so glad we have for the first time a wife in the First Presidency. To which I said, "Oh no we don't."

Unknown Speaker 24:04

Charmaine leaves us with an intriguing thought about why some people, particularly men have struggled to accept women's ordination in the Community of Christ.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:14

Times of not being accepted, to tend to be more awkward than they were hurtful. And, you know, that was, you know, I really think having been in the Michigan region as people were struggling with starting to accept ordination of women was really helpful, because I could mostly see that these were not mean people, you know, they were not people who, who wanted to harm but they were just struggling so hard with their own preconceptions of who God was and, and you know, maybe the maleness of God and, and, and maybe for some unrecognized assumptions that men are better than women or more more religious or more spiritual. And you know, they couldn't probably put words to that yet, but it was it was making some men especially feel like they weren't as special as they thought they were.

Unknown Speaker 25:16

While there are differences and denominational roles and experiences ordain women have as we have highlighted in this episode are men similar are common experiences between these women is resilience in the face of gender discrimination, and finding support among others. In our next episode of women's rights, we look at the topic of interfaith ministry with each woman reflecting on their interactions across denominational lines.

Unknown Speaker 25:46

That concludes our podcast for today. Special thanks to Charmaine Chvala-Smith, Jane Gardner, Linda Booth and Becky Savage.

Unknown Speaker 25:55

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 reading at Smith College. Next time on women's rights

Josh Mangelson 26:29

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