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Welcome to the Project Zion podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Elray Henriksen 0:33

Hello, and welcome to Project Zion, The Restoration Caffeinated. Today is the third podcast in our new international series, Grounds for Peace under the auspices of peaceprojects.edu. In this series we are asking what are the grounds you might say the foundations for a new peaceful humanity. I am your host, Elray Henrickson, Team Leader of the Community of Christ European Peace and Justice Team and full time volunteer for Community of Christ in Europe. According to Steve Veazey, President of Community of Christ, "No matter where we start from as individuals, our calling our purpose as a human species is to be a peaceful humanity." The phrase peaceful humanity is another way of saying Zion, God's peaceful reign on Earth where everything is as it should be. Today, our guest is Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin in a further discussion on ecumenical and interfaith partnerships and advocacy. Reverend Dr. Zac Harmon McLachlan is the dean and math faculty member of the community of Christ Seminary, and director of Religious Studies at Graceland University. Zac received a BA in religion in 2008 from Graceland and an MA in religion in 2010 from the Community of Christ seminary. He recently completed his doctorate of ministry in executive leadership from San Francisco Theological Seminary is this statement was titled post church ecclesiology the future of Community of Christ through ambiguity and principle. Zac is an ordained minister of Community of Christ and holds the priesthood of 70. He currently serves the church as a member of the interfaith and ecumenical team. He is passionate about peace and justice, environmental justice and belonging. And Zac considers himself a practitioner scholar. His favorite quote is from theologian Anne Lamott, "The opposite of faith is not doubt the opposite of faith is certainty." Please say hello to our listeners, Zac.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 2:35

I, everybody.

Elray Henriksen 2:37

Thank you for that. What are the things in relation to church that you are most certain about?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 2:42

What are the things that I'm uncertain about?

Elray Henriksen 2:45

Most certain about!

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 2:47

Most certain about? Here's so here's what I always tell people. So I have three degrees in religion. And the only thing that I'm really certain about is that I am not God. So that's, that's my certainty. level and what I mean by that is I am a part of God, I am beloved by God, I am with God. I co create with God. I am not God. So that's that's my the end of my certainty.

Elray Henriksen 3:15

Well, thank you. I mean, back in the days I used to talk about divine masculinity. So perhaps that's one of the things we ought to explore. Zac, I'm so glad you could join us today to continue this important discussion about one of the dimensions of our holistic peacemaking model that informs this peace colloquium. One of those I find the most interesting and crucial, perhaps, which is to form action teams for peace. So, Zac, you recently gave a webinar on ecumenical and interfaith partnerships and advocacy as part of the 2020 European peace colloquium webinar series. Our listeners can access this webinar at peaceprojects.edu or on the Community of Christ Europe YouTube page. First, is it possible for you to explain to our listeners what ecumenism is? And also what we mean perhaps by interfaith partnerships?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 4:10

Yeah. So when we talk about ecumenical work or ecumenism, what we're really talking about is cross Christian partnerships, so multiple denominations, or faith identities within the Christian paradigm. And so, ecumenism is when, for example, Catholics and Community of Christ come together to work on a common project that share some missional alignment for both entities. So it's not it's not the work of proselytizing or trying to convince others to join your denominational identity. It's the work of partnering to further the kingdom, the kingdom of God, God's preferred future. So, ecumenism is cross Christian partnering, and then when we talk about interfaith That's when we expand a little bit farther out. And so interfaith partnerships are where we go beyond the Christian paradigm beyond the Christian story in Christian theology into other avenues of faith. So Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, all these, these various forms of faith to again, find those points of commonality those points of missional alignment, while we may have different theological perspectives, and we may have different practices or practice we also share a desire to to fulfill and engage for the common good. So ecumenism is kind of Christian focused interfaith work is beyond the Christian scope, as we kind of further the betterment of the world through our shared mission aligned, practice.

Elray Henriksen 5:50

Great. So the African American theologian Howard Thurman into this a asked what the world needs ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people have come alive. So for me, you're one of those people, I think, who have come alive. And one of my first question was immediately So tell me, why are you so excited?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 6:15

Well, that is about an hour long answer. And I know this podcast isn't that long, I believe in in transformation. And I've had this just amazingly blessed life. And one of the blessings of my life was to be able to be a World Service Corps volunteer with Community of Christ. When I was I was 20. When I started my birthday was actually while I was on my assignment, and so I turned

21. But I was sent to Zambia, Africa, and I spent most of my time in rural Zambia, in the northern part of the country. And it changed my life forever. It was the first place I met Jesus, even though I had been baptized. since I was eight years old, gone to church every week since I was a child, I heard Jesus preach from the pulpit for more than a decade. And then the first time I met Jesus, I was 21 in rural Zambia. What I mean by that is I began to read so there was so much space, the pace of life in Zambia, at least at that point, at that point of time, when I was there was so much slower than my western US pace of life, which was just do, do, do, do, do, go, go, go, go, go, go. I had all this space in my day to day life. And so I started I didn't have anything with me but a Bible. I started reading the New Testament. And the more I read the New Testament, the more I thought, Oh my gosh, I I don't know who this Jesus is. Because this Jesus that I'm reading about, is a radical criminal, who's a revolutionary. He he's innovative, he's engaging in challenging the status quo and and confronting systems and practices that are broken. And I was like, Where's this Jesus been my whole life. And keep in mind, I'm reading about this Jesus while I am in the midst of the world's poorest of the poor. And so the backdrop for me reading this New Testament is in a village where there's no electricity, no running water, we had to walk about almost just shy of a mile to the community pump. And so I'm reading about this radical Jesus, coming from this Western paradigm in the US where we have an overabundance of whatever we want and consumerism out the wazoo. And I'm reading about this radical Jesus who is saying, set all that down. Notice the oppressed and marginalized. The good news is for the poor, and I'll never forget along along like I said, this is like an hour long testimony but a long story short, when I was in my 20s, my early 20s. I really wanted to travel the world. I wanted I wanted to work in the global south. I wanted to be in those places doing advocacy work and working on poverty, and issues of humanitarian issues. And one day in Zambia, I was, I was feeling really kind of just overwhelmed by the complexity of the world, this Jesus that was messing up my life. And I went out and I took a short walk from the small house we were staying in. And I sat on this giant termite hill that had one singular tree kind of growing out of it. And I just started to breathe in this leaf fell from the tree onto my leg. And I remember looking at this leaf and just thinking, this insignificant, meaningless leaf that no one cares about, is perfect. It was created with such care and such thoughtfulness. Everything was perfect on it. And the next, the next thing that just entered my heart, my soul was this sense of Zac, heal the church. Now I say that not as like some savior or anything like that. So please, listeners don't misunderstand me, I do not think I'm the fixer of the church by any means. But this just deep in person heal the church. And what it took from that experience was, if we can stop playing church and become the church, we can change the world. If we can move beyond our complacency, and the church paradigm, at least where I come from, in the United States, of churches about me and my needs and what I did, and shift our focus to the prophetic reality of the inward outward journey, the interior life that's coupled and paired at its root, with the external life. All of that pushed me to this place now where, you know, I feel like my sense of call is really I want Want to be the church? I want to embody it. I want to incarnate it. I want to be the hands and feet of Jesus in a broken world.

Elray Henriksen 11:09

So what I'm hearing is two things, actually. One is the major contrast between your life as it was coming from the US and meeting rural Africa. Yeah. Rural Zambia, and and the other is kind of a moment of deep introspection of what's the purpose of all of this? Why Why are we doing this?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 11:35

Yeah, that's exactly right. I mean, I, I left that experience in Zambia. And I, I came right back to Kansas City, where Missouri and the United States where I grew up, on my way back to Graceland University, whereas in college at the time, and I told everyone who would listen about Jesus, about this radical person, that the more I read the New Testament, the more I learned about this Jesus, the more I realized, oh my gosh, in my mind, salvation was all about me. In my mind being baptized, salvation was for my soul was for my identity. The more I read the words of Jesus, the more I walked away from that conversation with Jesus of oh my gosh, salvation is about belovedness and belonging, and belonging, and belovedness only happen when I see myself. And when I see Jesus in you, when the other is no longer the other. And that's a transformational thought. Because all of a sudden, you can just simply say, well, it's not an issue for me, that's somebody else's problem. Because you say, wait a minute, that's my salvation. That is my belovedness. And so I can't just cast the marginalized or the oppressed off or the poor off or, you know, whatever I have to deeply and authentically engage with that, and that's not to say, you know, I fail at that all the time, right? I'm not perfect I, I participate in a capitalist culture that is based on consumerism that often, you know, dismisses sometimes with intention, sometimes with unintentional the poor anyway, all of that to say, my deep sense of call rests in this reality that in their welfare resides my welfare. It's the truest sense of compassion to suffer with the other.

Elray Henriksen 13:30

So I was one of your students, I've heard you talk about God's preferred future, a lot. Could you say a bit more about what you mean by that, by that phrase, and how you came to use that phrase, actually, because it was new to me when I heard you say,

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 13:45

Yeah, so I actually get asked this a lot. I did not coined the phrase. I've heard it used in various settings, particularly in the ecumenical and interfaith world. I started using it, partly because I find the phrase Kingdom of God a bit tricky. Kingdom, the way in which Jesus is using a Jesus's is using the word Kingdom as a direct challenge to authority and power. So he's trying to shape you know, this different vision of what a kingdom looks like they're living in the midst of empirical rule. But Kingdom still implies a hierarchy, it still implies this idea, you know that there's a top and a bottom. And so then eventually I shifted to the phraseology of Kindom of God, this idea of belonging and belovedness, like I just talked about, but most recently, in the last couple years, I've been using the phrase God's preferred future. So as a prophetic body, you know, Community of Christ, we believe that we're in continual relationship, revelatory relationship with God. And if that's the case, then that makes the assumption that God is still creating, that God is actively engaging the world in transformation and change and so that would that would get us theologically to a place where we can begin to articulate. God has a preference. God has a God is working towards something meaningful, something different that

surely this creation that we're a part of, has work to do has room to grow. And so this idea of working with God toward God's preferred future indicates a reality that it's not done. It's not perfect. There's there's work to be done. And so anyway, one of my favorite kind of uses of that phrase has been, was at the USA National Council of Churches gathering last year we gathered on the beach in Virginia, where in 1619, so we gathered in 2019 and 1619. The first enslaved Africans arrived on the beaches of North America, at least documented and we gathered to pray, to lament to confess, you know, this tragic sin of slavery and racism. And the the Speaker of the day simply shared the phrase, "Let us work toward God's preferred future in which racism doesn't have one." And the that, that grabbed me to the core, this idea that in God's preferred future and Gods preference, certain things don't exist. Racism doesn't exist. Violence doesn't exist, which you know, in the Community of Christ church seal with a lion and a lamb, predator and prey, you know, mortal enemies where violence must take place for the sustaining of life. Yet in God's preferred future, that violence doesn't exist, life finds a different way. So that's kind of where that comes from. It's it's simply a way to articulate our our partnership And prophetic relationship with God.

Elray Henriksen 17:04

So I love that this has ecumenical roots. I mean, this is great. In terms of this podcast, this question that we kind of exploring. In that sense, it makes me question the next question, which is really how do we partner with God in making that future happen? Because this is really what what this what this is about? How do we go down to actually doing it?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 17:28

Yeah. So this is like really key, particularly when we talk about creating action teams. You know, many of us that live in western countries have been educated through a lens of critical thinking. And so we're solution oriented by virtue of our education, we see a problem and we want to fix it. The problem with that when we start talking about giant social or humanitarian issues, is that the solutions are overwhelming, right? And we often will find ourselves in conversation with one another where we say what can I do to change Climate change, right? Like, I'm not an executive of a oil and gas company, I'm I, what am I going to do? Right? Like, there's only so much me, in the Midwest of the United States. Sure, I can recycle. I can lower my single use plastic consumption. I can, you know, there's things I can do. But it's overwhelming to think about the big picture solution. When we start thinking about issues of peace and justice, we often hold ourselves hostage to the 50,000 foot solution of humanitarian problems. What's so important here is that we really grab on to the wisdom of Mother Teresa. And this is something that is often overlooked, but so deeply, wildly profoundly important. You know, Mother Teresa was flooded with visitors who would seek her out in Calcutta. Simply to just try to almost reminds me of like the scripture where the woman tries to touch the hem of Jesus's robe right, just just to get a touch just to maybe some of that that profound ministry will walk rub off on me if I can just get close. So people flooded Mother Teresa, right? And she would always tell these people, often Westerners who would come.

Just do small things with great love. Small things with great love will change the world. And I think when we begin to talk about how we actually partner with God, we have to let go of our

aspirational hope. And and and so don't misunderstand me listeners I'm not talking about, well, let's sit down aspiration and hope. What I'm talking about is calibrating that to our context. So if I am just one person in the Midwest of the United States of America, what can I begin to do to create change, realizing that my subtle actions have much broader ripples and engagement with complex systems than I know. And so as we begin to form action teams, We need to focus on our context on our community, and begin to notice through some some of the process in which I laid out in the webinar, which you can go and watch, but really beginning to work through small actions that are transformative for community. And ultimately, what those small actions do is they create story. And ultimately out of that story, we begin to tell that story and other people are empowered and inspired. This is ultimately what changes legislation and policy on national levels and then global levels that have a transforming effect, right? And you see this with, you know, communities in this in the Appalachians of the United States have worked for decades to end mountaintop removal for mining, and they begin to tell stories of how this has impacted their family. And that story is way more engaging than the data we know the empirical data that mountaintop removal has terrible environmental effects. But people tend to cast aside the data. It's its data. So it's like, well, yeah, that's bad, but it doesn't really impact me. That's a shame for that mountain. But I don't really live near that mountain. So it's not a problem. But when you hear the story of a child who's gotten sick because of chemical runoff has gotten into the water of their family's home. That's very different. That's a different story than the data that's associated with it. So all this is to say, small actions in our communities where we live in our context, to set in motion, meaningful change. There's a wonderful book by Susan Bowman called How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going. And in this book, she talks about the difference between aspirational purpose and proximate purpose. And what she's really trying to articulate is, so if we really want to change systemic racism, and the aspiration is to end systemic racism, we have to start with baby steps. And she uses the metaphor of building the bridge as we're walking on it. So now not waiting for the bridge to be done so we can walk across it, that's gonna, that's going to take too much time and we'll end up quitting because that's, you know, that's just way too much work. But if we walk on the bridge while we're building it board by board, piece by piece, slow, small subtle actions of meaningful change. Ultimately, we're, we're getting closer and closer to the aspirational purpose. So we all need to heed the wisdom of Mother Teresa, small actions with great love.

Elray Henriksen 22:38

Love that. You mentioned in that webinar also Matthew 18, where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there also. Can you say more about how small action teams actually make a difference? Because it's not. For me, it's not just the the one person doing small acts of great love. It's kind of went two or three Meaning actually come together and share a vision share a mission designed to do something together Actually, that's when things happen.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 23:07

That's right. So I was actually going to start going down that road, but I felt like I was getting too preachy. That's so that's exactly right. So Matthew 18, has really become kind of a, a Northern Star for me a guiding light. Again, many of us who live in Western cultures, by virtue of how our

cultures are created through capitalism, we have business models of success in our minds, right, even for the church. And so bigger is better, more numbers are better. Right? And this is how we think. We think about it in terms of money, we think about it in terms of people. And so that's just how we think and process and so the assumption in the United States where I live is, while your church is dying, if you have less than 20 people attending every week, it's dying. And that's bad. I'm over here thinking, why do we think that? Who's Who said it's dying? And at what point did we decide there was like a critical number of critical mass to make sure church was church because Jesus is over here saying, hey, hey, two or three, two or three, because the gospel is relational. So you've got to have at least two. But you don't need more than that. Because here's the thing, church folk, God can do impossible things. God can raise a dead man. God can resurrect. God can transform empire. God can topple mountains. And we're over here saying no, no, no, no, that's that's just a story. That's just, that's just some crazy story. And God is saying, no, no, no, no, I make the impossible possible. I make transformation reality. I make incarnation every every day and so and I even often will joke because Community of Christ says, to form a congregation, you need at least six. And so I always joke and say, Community of Christ, thinks were a little better than Jesus. Because, you know, Jesus has two or three and Community of Christ is like, no, no, let's double that. Let's go six, just to be on the safe side. So, you know, that's just a little joke there. No one please, no one get mad at me. But this is where we're really talking about reorienting success. And Margaret Mead, you know, many of us have heard that quote from Margaret Mead. "Never forget that a small group of people can change the world indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." And this is true, right? You think of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, these people who changed the world. It began with small actions with just a couple of folk where they they decided to stand up and show up and say, "This is not okay. Someone must do something about this." And ultimately, what gravitated people to those movements, more than data, more than fact, more than truth was the stories they told in those stories transformed the world.

Elray Henriksen 26:09

So you have one story that I'd like to hear recently because the Black Lives Matter movement. You You took initiative for something. What did that mean? What did that what did that imply? Could you share a bit that story with us?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 26:24

Yeah, absolutely. So for the listeners, obviously, the United States was was rocked months ago by the murder of George Floyd. And, you know, because the United States everything becomes political and everything becomes right or left and that's, that makes ethical and moral issues incredibly frustrating because for me, these aren't political issues. These are issues of humanity, that as a disciple of Jesus, I don't look at murder through a political lens. Look at it through the compassionate people. Beloved nature of God's beloved, for me, that's a hard thing to connect with. So anyway, I live in Independence, Missouri and I live about a block from the Community of Christ Temple, which is just this this beautiful place that's designated that's that's blessed as an insight of peace. It's it's stunning. It's by far the tallest building in independence. Maybe the tallest building in Jackson County, I don't really know. But it's just this this beautiful towering temple that calls our attention to peace that calls our attention to this idea of the Kingdom of

God, God's preferred future. And so, as the weeks after George, George Floyd's murder were unfolding, you know, the United States was embroiled with with protests, every major city across the United States, New York, LA Seattle, Kansas City, Chicago. They all had, you know, thousands and thousands of protesters say, this is not okay. Police need to be held accountable. What happened to George Floyd was unmistakably murder. I mean, he knelt on his neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds. I mean, just, it's impossible to try to justify that even though people have. And so I was here in Independence. And I've been a longtime protester. And I kept thinking, Wait a minute, Community of Christ and the Restoration movement have this long, theological narrative of Zion being in Independence, Missouri now, for the Community of Christ that changed. In the early 20th century, we we quickly realized that Zion is not necessarily a physical isolated place, but happens across the world that Zion exists as a condition of God's people. So we've kind of shifted that narrative but yet still independence. Missouri has been this kind of sacred idea of what may be possible and I kept thinking wait Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, we have this ensign of peace here. And we say that this place should be a glimpse of Zion, then where are the people showing up to say what's happened is not okay. This is not peaceful, and that our country is broken and that we need to reorient toward peace. And so I thought, you know, it was a Thursday afternoon and I thought, I'm gonna, I'm going to show up, I'm going to just, you know, put out a call to all my friends and anyone who wants to come and say, we need to stand up and proclaim this land this spot as peaceful. And what's really crazy, Elray, most people don't know this. In 1945, I think it was 45 the President of the United States Harry S. Truman stood in the Community of Christ Auditorium, and for the first time in history, told people that the United States would be an original signatory to the United Nations that happened here in Independence, Missouri. And so there's a UN Peace Plaza, commemorating that event saying, this was a place where we decided we did not want war anymore following World War Two, that we had failed humanity. And that never again, should the sins of that war happen in this world. And so Harry Truman, as President of the United States, says, you know, we're signing on to the UN. And I'm thinking all this is in Independence, where is the outrage? And so I simply put a call out, and this is what's really important. I'm a white heterosexual guy. Every bit of privilege for the most part slants my direction. And I kept thinking I kept having this overwhelming sense of how can I as a white person, hold a Black Lives Matter protest? What does that mean? I don't want to speak for anybody. It's not my job to speak for anybody and I need to be really cautious about my role. In standing up for justice, which is really complicated really quickly. And so and actually what was really amazing is I had people in the community call me out on it. And they would call and say, Hey, Zac, I saw that you're going to you're going to march and independence. Are you going to have any Black activists speaking? Or is it just you? And I said, Why? I don't know. I you know, right now, it's just me. And I don't know what we should do. And what was amazing was it quickly moved beyond me. And so friends would say, Hey, I have this friend, who is an advocate of Black Lives Matter. He could come and speak. And this friend, she could come and speak. And so what happened in just really like 24 hours, we had these amazing activists come and share with us from the Black perspective. And so I really did nothing. I simply stood up and welcomed. Everybody said, Here's why we're here. Now my job is to listen. My job is to listen and elevate these voices, to stand as an ally as a friend, as support. And then they took it over. And I really didn't say anything else. I the only other thing I did that that protest was share a prayer. But I

stepped aside to let these other voices be heard. Again, that's not about me, that's about the community holding me accountable to my privilege. And saying, Zac, this isn't about you and me knowing that and saying, yeah, but I need help. So what does this look like and how do we make this better? And I know we failed in some ways, but I also know that on a hot, hot, hot Sunday, and Independence, Missouri, almost 300 people showed up to walk with me. And we knelt for eight minutes and 46 seconds on concrete, in remembrance of George Floyd, but not just George Floyd, every other black person who has been systemically murdered in this country. Long story short, I mean, it was, it was a powerful act of calling our attention to injustice and peace. And at the end of the day, and this gets back to your last question about action teams in particular and in partnership with God. One phrase that has emerged from the Black Lives Matter movement here in the United States that I absolutely love is progression, not perfection. And what I love about that phrase is that it moves us away from the idea that unless we're going to perfectly act, we can't move to this reality that you we will fail, we're going to say the wrong thing. And we're going to mess up and we're going to unintentionally, maybe offend or even simply participate in a system that's broken. But we're, we're building that bridge as we're walking on it. We're trying to grow our awareness and understanding of the brokenness of the world so that we can be part of the healing and transformation of the world.

Elray Henriksen 33:49

So one of the questions we actually got from one of our webinar attendees was, you know, it's about inquiry, willingness to not know not having all the answers. You mentioned some of those things in the webinar. And, and this is similar to the spiritual practice of standing in the question or sitting with the questions. It's basically the sermon. The problem is that discernment can be a long process. So is there a way to practice discernment on an ongoing basis to help us be ready to respond and act more swiftly or quickly? Or, you know, I mean, like you said, it's like, you were saying, wait, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, you know, and I'm like, and I'm just asking, you know, how do you how do you get to the wait a minute, I need to do something?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 34:38

So I often will, you know, sometimes people get frustrated with discernment because they're ready to act. Like we don't have time to stern. And what I always tell them in response to that is you're doing it wrong. You know, if you're not in action, then you're not in discernment. Because the two are paired. They are not mutually exclusive. They happen simultaneously together. And so this is really important. In fact, Parker Palmer, the author, activist, sociologist, theologian, if you're not familiar with Parker Palmer read him He's great. He calls it contemplative action. So the first thing we have to do when we start talking about discernment is we have to remove ourselves from linear thinking. discernment is not one dimensional or two dimensional. discernment is three dimensional. What I mean by that is discernment. And action often happens simultaneously. They're in movement and partnership together. And so for whatever reason, I've many people have kind of pigeon holed discernment as this process that leads us to action and it does. But what they've, what we've often done is said, well, while we're in discernment, we're not acting. And I'm like, Whoa, that's nonsense. Wait a minute. discernment is the our active ability to listen and to notice what God is up to in our midst the

word in Latin literally means to sift and sort to become aware of God. So we're sifting through the noise and distraction of our world to notice God's invitation in the midst of all this chaos and brokenness. So we have to stop thinking linearly. And we have to start embodying this idea that Jesus gives us and Luke five, which is you know, they're they're out on the boat. They've been fishing all night long. And Jesus shows up this carpenter, who is not a fisherman shows up on the boat and says, Hey, you guys are fishing wrong. And you have to imagine the disciples were probably really angry by this like, wait a minute, man. You work with wood. We work with fish. We know how to fish you don't. There's been a long night we haven't caught anything. You need to relax before we get angry. And Jesus says, No, no, trust me, cast out into the deep. And you have to imagine these disciples are just like, Oh my gosh, somebody get them off my boat before I toss him in the water but Yes, somehow patience prevails. And they say, okay, Jesus, well, we'll give this a go. But we're here to tell you we've been fishing all night, it ain't gonna work. The fish are in the shallow water. And yet we know the story, right? They go deeper, they go deeper, they get off the surface off the linear plane of thought, and they go deep. And the catch so many fish, the net breaks, they can hardly pull all the fish in. We need to embody that wisdom and go deeper into our discernment. So what I mean by that is contemplation and action, discernment, and Kingdom building happens simultaneously. They're in tandem together. And that grows because the more you act, the more inquiry you have. The more question you have, the more experience and invitation you have. And the more of those things you have than the more you have to bring before God to say God, where are you at in the midst of this? What's your invitation to us? Are you at work in the midst of these things? And so, anytime we separate action and contemplation or action and discernment, we need to be cautious because the to go in tandem with one another. But that gets us into three dimensional thinking and away from that. We often use discernment as a means to an end. And while it can be that and probably should be that, I often think we're missing the point because we'll hold ourselves captive to contemplation, waiting for this like magical, okay moment to go and act based on what we've discerned when in reality, harkening back to the words of Mother Teresa, as we're discerning, we're engaging in small, meaningful actions.

Elray Henriksen 38:50

It's kind of like partnering, if I can take back, you know, the idea of partnering with God. Yeah, seems silly. Like we wait for God to tell us what to do, or do we actually work with God as God is acting in the world and through us and with us, but also with others whom we don't yet know.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 39:13

Yeah. So that I you're you're answering your own question, you're, the interesting thing here is that we cannot, we cannot be advocates of peace and justice with God, unless we are in relationship with God. And this is really hard for us, because I don't know about our listeners, but I'm a control freak, and I often don't have time for God. So I end up following my own agenda, my own desire, my own focus, the whole point of discernment, is to hold us tightly in relationship with God. And so to authentically engage in the work of peace in the work of justice. There's an assumption that I am already deeply in relationship with God Where I'm taking things to God holding them with God, as God invites me into what God is already up to in

our midst. And when you think about the the movements of of our church of the Community of Christ, most of these movements have happened because of encounter because testimony because someone has had such a transformational experience with God, they begin to act. That's discernment.

Elray Henriksen 40:28

So I'm, you know, as we said, we were going to talk about ecumenical and interfaith partnerships. And this is kind of building up to all of this because I think that part of the question that stands with me now is, okay, so in order to kind of work with others of other faiths or other denominations in Christianity, we need to know first, where and how we want to work and how we are going to partner with God and what The preferred future that God has for us, but also for all the people that we share this planet with. Could you could you say something like, when when did you work with others outside of our own faith community? And that made a difference that otherwise would have gone unanswered. You know, I mean, it's like, if you hadn't done this with somebody else outside of our faith community, it wouldn't have happened.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 41:27

Yeah, absolutely. I can share about the very first thing I ever did. that put me on this path toward wanting to work in ecumenical and interfaith partnerships. So, again, this was a this is a story from my early 20s. I was at Graceland University in Lamoni, Iowa. I was a bit of a rebel radical then. And one of the issues in Decatur County, Iowa in the United States Decatur county at that time and I don't know if it still is was the poorest county in Iowa. There were issues of food scarcity, and families having the ability to access quality food and have groceries for their family to eat. And so, with work with an incredible lady named Gwen Simpson, Community of Christ member in Lamoni, and the local Methodist Church, we began the process of creating a food bank, because the people who were affected by this issue of food scarcity weren't just Community of Christ. They were Methodist, there were Baptist, they were Catholic, they were Lutheran. And so we began the work of partnering and saying, look, this is an issue for our folks. And it's an issue for your folks. It's an issue for the whole county. What can we do to make sure folks have access to food even when they don't have money? Even if they don't have the financial capacity to go to the grocery store that, you know, had some programs for people of a lower economic status and long story short, we partnered with the Methodist Church in particular, but the other denominations in the area were also supportive and engaging. It was mostly the Methodist Church in the Community of Christ Church. But we work together and what ended up happening was Community of Christ had some financial capacity. The Methodist Church had some physical capacity, like building space. And so what we ended up doing was with with Community of Christ, financial resources, and the Methodist building, we were able to in their building, create, buy shelves, get food, create a partnership with other statewide nonprofits that provided food, and we were able to create this food pantry, where through our church communities get the word out to say, hey, if you can't afford groceries, if you're on hard times, if you're struggling finding quality food, because of money, reasons or any other reason, come here. We'll get you the food that you need. And we couldn't do that on our own commune of Christ couldn't do that on our own. We didn't have a place for a food pantry. And

we didn't necessarily have the volunteer capacity for it. But partnering with the Methodist Church, we had capacity for Community of Christ and Methodist volunteers. We had a physical location we could do we had financial resources. And so pretty soon we had this complete picture where we could say, hey, no one in Decatur county needs to go hungry. We have a food pantry. We have a food bank where you can come and we couldn't do it by ourselves. It required multiple faiths jumping in and saying this impacts us. We believe in making sure that God's children are fed. We're going to do this together. And that was the very first ecumenical thing I ever did. that put me on this path saying wait a minute, we can't solve the issues of this world on our own. And indeed, we shouldn't try. But when we pool our resources, and work together, we can make tangible difference in a meaningful way. So that was, that was the first thing I did.

Elray Henriksen 45:06

That sounds great. But But how do you organize are there networks of food pantries out there, you know that that can do advocacy and advocate on the political issues that lead to people not having the sufficient food? You know, I just it just, I mean, obviously those things exist, but do our, you know, is this something that we get involved in?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 45:31

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So, this is where we have to calibrate success and action to baby steps. So here's the thing that was in 2000, I want to say 7. It's now 2020. That food pantry is still going strong, and the partnerships and advocacy that have come out of that. The Graceland Business Group, which is now called Enactus. has even engaged and participated in this food pantry. We've worked Senators and Congress, people from the state of Iowa, who have have come and told the story of what's happened in Lamoni and Decatur County as a success. And so when we start this work, it starts slow and it starts small. It's arduous, but it's meaningful and transformational. I didn't know the Methodist pastor when we began that work. I think Gwen knew her through just happenstance relationship through community and relationship. And so this is where networking, the people that we know, become really important. And if you don't know them, make relationships with them. So when I was a young pastor, I was in my 20s in Southern California in the United States. I was a young pastor, I had no idea what I was doing. And we wanted to start engaging in some advocacy work. And so I called a local nonprofit called the Friendly Center in Southern California. Got the name of some ministers who supported them. And this has been lie I got the name of a guy named Stan who was the pastor's of pastor of a Disciples of Christ Church, just a few miles away from our church. I called him and said, "Can we meet? Can we talk?" And we just formed a relationship. I mean, it wasn't rocket science. It was just, I want to get engaged. I want to participate in relationship and I want to change this community. I want to make sure no child goes hungry in Orange, California. I want to make sure that there are safe places for community in Orange, California. And through our relationship with Stan we got involved with clergy and Lady United for Economic Justice. We got involved with California Power and Light, which is a climate change organization. With clergy we got engaged with a whole host of these networks of ecumenical and interfaith work, which ultimately led us to partnering on a panel for city government that moved us toward advocating for policy change based on the actions of faith and community. Can't speak for the

European context, but the reality is in the United States that most food pantries, homeless shelters, access to school supplies and resources. Even nonprofits are religiously based in the United States in orange at the time, it was 80% of those things came out of churches, or religious movements. And so we were able to go to the government and say, Hey, we are the caretakers of this community. And we have the data to back that up. And we need you to start making change and policy change implementation that reflects that for us, because not only are we doing this together out of a sense of being missionally aligned and wanting to care for our neighbor, as a theological mandate. We're a large voting bloc, and we're the people that vote in this community as well. I share all that to say these are small actions that that build on one another over time because our network of relationship expands and our ability to participate with others. grows. But it starts with, Hey, I just met this family and they don't have access to food. I know this lady named Gweyn, she cares a lot about this. I'm going to talk to her about it. We talked to her, Hey, I know the Methodist pastor, she has also mentioned this to me, let's get together and see what we can do. Why don't we, you know, kind of survey our members and see if we can get some food together. And there's this this nonprofit called harvesters in Iowa, maybe they'll give us some food and we can. And then 12 years later, it's still going strong. And you know, I it's it's feeding hundreds of people. It's pushed me into relationships with pastors and priests and clergy from all over. I've sat on government councils, I've lobbied Congress, people and senators in the United States have gone to the United Nations all of these things. Because of just one little story of Hey, this family can't eat. What are we going to do about that? These small proximate purpose is building the bridges. We walk on it. This is where an action team starts. And it can happen anywhere it can happen in Brussels, Germany, UK, anywhere, what's happening in your neighborhood, and expand those relationships expand that possibility.

Elray Henriksen 50:14

I mean, this is a great like, a change story that that kind of probably informs your theory of change how things actually can, can change. And I just want to make the link between where we started off which was these transformational encounters with with other people. And since since I've been a student, I've been fascinated by this exploration of who the other is so trying to learn from the other the good that they embody. Could you mention a time where your own prejudice was challenged in relation to people of another faith? Yeah, no, that's kind of a bit.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 50:52

just one time because there's a lot.

Elray Henriksen 50:56

Yeah, you know,

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 50:58

Yeah, gosh, This has taken me a long time and I'm still, I'm still learning. I'm learning how to not be right. And I'm learning how to not be in control. And I think I'm getting better at it. But I still have a lot of work to do. The best example I can give, would would be at an event called ecumenical advocacy days. In the United States that happens in Washington, DC every year,

and thousands of people from all kinds of Christian faiths, Christian denominations gather, to worship together to learn together and then ultimately we go and lobby our representatives from where we live to say, hey, these are the things we want you to do for peace and justice in our country, and it's really amazing. Well, I'll never forget one year I was with we were, we were dealing with the issue of incarceration reform here in the United States, which if any of the listeners are familiar with the justice system in the United States, you know that our African Americans, black people are incarcerated at outrageous numbers in comparison to white people in the United States. And so we need justice reform. We need reform on this front. And so I, I was going to lobby one day, and everyone I was lobbying with was of different faiths than me. And they were different colors than me, right? It was black people. And I was making some assumptions about why certain things were happening, that they really helped me open my eyes to my privilege, the place in which I sat, shaped what I saw. And so for me, I wasn't seeing issues of injustice I was seeing, you know, I was treating it as this abstract system. And I was being helped to see the humaneness of it. I had, I had set aside the humanity of The issue to just make it a justice issue. And as we were advocating together, it became a human issue. These were brothers and sisters, sons, daughters, husbands, wives of people that were being treated without any reverence for their own belovedness. And so that's probably the best exam, although it happens all the time. It happens so much that I have shifted my there's an expectation, I think, sometimes because I run the seminary, and I have a degree that I somehow know answers. And let me just clarify on this podcast. That is not true. I don't have the answers. I have no idea. In fact, if, if all of my education has taught me anything, it's taught me to constantly be in a stance of inquiry, to constantly hold ambiguity at the forefront. To know that I am a learner first. I'm a student and anytime I go into a situation with the assumption of really knowing something, I need to be really cautious because I learned really quickly that I was either making an assumption or I was off base or you know, where whatever it was. So I'm learning all the time about my prejudices, my privileges, the places in which I have blinders on to the world.

Elray Henriksen 54:25

So if you're learning, imagine how some of us might feel about, you know, being in a learning position, especially when we go out into the world as lay ministers and, and try to, you know, just make a difference and have encounters that that could, that could lead to change. I mean, the reason I'm going there is because you mentioned also that we were pretty late to the game of ecumenical relations and interfaith work as a community of faith. Also, partially because we came to existence pretty late in a I'm 60 1832 1860. And and I'm just, I was just thinking how to reinvent the wheel. I mean, it's like, are we reinventing the wheel? When we start saying, you know, go out there and do something good? Or is it really just about going out there and learning where people are doing and joining the joining in the work that they're doing?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 55:22

Yes, it's a both hand to challenge the status quo, new things will have to be created. So on one hand, yeah, we're gonna have to, we're gonna have to recreate something. On the other hand, that only happens through partnership and relationship with what other people are already doing. The hundreds of hours of work that have gone into advocacy and justice work ahead of

us. And so I'm a big believer in inquiry. I'm a big believer in ambiguity and here's why. All the great things that have changed the world happened because somebody asked a question. Somebody wandered and had curiosity. Somebody was so engaged in mystery, that they discovered something new. That changed the world. Right? And we can, we could go down the list of all the inventions and technological advances. But those things only happen because the discoverer had a willingness to not know. What's possible? How could this happen? I feel like there might be a way to do this thing. And so when we talk about justice and advocacy work, we have to know a couple things. One, you're going to change, you're going to go into this work, or into a small action of creating a food pantry, and you're going to come out on the other end of it, building a homeless shelter or walking the halls of Parliament or whatever it is, right. Like, like you're going to discover new things, not only about yourself, but about your community. Because you're going to hear more stories, you're going to see more things, you're going to be exposed to possibilities that previously, you just didn't see because you weren't in that place. And so, when we partner with other people, it begins with a simple inquiry. What is God up to? And what is God inviting me to. And then as we go out and we, you know, call random pastors or clergy on the phone, or we call up a local nonprofit, or whatever it is that we do, to engage in some small action. We continue that process of wonder and mystery, curiosity, as we partner and through our willingness to not know, we discover something new. This is what it means to be a prophetic people. You cannot be a prophet, and already know that to be a prophet, by its very nature is to have a stance of inquiry with God. God, where shall you have me go? God, what are you up to? God? Where are you calling me? Moses did this Isaiah did this. Elijah did this Jesus Did this. I mean,

Elray Henriksen 58:02

It leads to a lot of conflict.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 58:05

It does!

Elray Henriksen 58:07

It's very uncomfortable.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 58:08

It is uncomfortable. It gets, I mean, think about Moses was wanted for murder, and Jesus and God shows up and says, Hey, I need you to go back to the place where you're wanted for murder. Not only that, I want you to upset that Empire even more, and I want you to take all their slaves, and I want you to run away. And Moses has to be like, no way. I'm out. I just saw this really cool burning bush, but it was a mistake. I'm going to go back to the sheep. You know, right. And Jesus knows this. Jesus knows this so much to his core. And this is this gets back to our conversation about contemplation and action. The two happening simultaneously. Jesus always retreats in prayer. Jesus always finds time for solitude and contemplation, and then goes back into action. And so if we're really going to be prophetic, if we're really going to engage in it Peace and Justice. Jesus gives us this model, action, retreat into prayer, back into action retreat into prayer, all the while being in relationship with God. And so yeah, it's uncomfortable. Yeah,

it's, it messes everything up. It's terrible. And it is perhaps the most rewarding incarnational experience of our faith.

Elray Henriksen 59:24

So there's two kind of conflicting thoughts here for me. One is you say everything is political, for example, in the United States, you mentioned that. And then the other is that I've heard you always say, everything is theological.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 59:38

That's right.

Elray Henriksen 59:39

And bad theology leads to bad actions. I don't know

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 59:44

Yeah. And bad politics.

Elray Henriksen 59:46

Yeah, that's politics. Right? Yeah. So So for me, it's kind of like what I'm hearing in a way is that theology is below I mean, that is kind of foundational and and also informs their political action and policies. And I'm just wondering, Who should we then ally ourselves with? How do we know which ministers to call?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 1:00:11

You often won't! You often won't until you do know, let me so let me explain what so everything is theological, which means politics or theological. And I often tell people, you know, people will often say politics needs to stay out of church. You know, it's not it gets too uncomfortable and disruptive and blah, blah. And after a while, I often will agree with I will say, absolutely. The problem is that politics have taken on theological issues. Immigration is not a political issue, it's in the Bible. That's a Bible first issue. So I I have a prerogative to engage with that because Jesus talks to me about it, right? So our politics, our theological and our our politicians have taken theological stuff spiritual ideas and politicize them. So my job is not to be left or right Democrat or Republican. My job is to incarnate Jesus. And that's where the real difficult work of theology comes into place. Because if we don't have the proper theological education necessary, we begin to put our own interpretation on theology to support our agenda. And this has been done for thousands of years, right. This is why we've created theologies of racism theologies of sexism, so on and so forth, which is why we have to do the theological work to say what's the context here, which directly connects us to the second part of your question, which is, how do we know who to act with? It's always contextual. It's always contextual. So partnerships in Germany may look very different than partnerships in France or the UK by virtue of the context of those cultures and What the needs of the community, issues of the community are that are facing. And so for me, our relationships often start with just a quick bit of research, whatever issue it is that you're passionate about, find an organization that's already kind of working on that, and then go through their list of members or affiliates,

see who's already partnering with with them and what they're doing. And then this is the part that makes most people super uncomfortable. You gotta show up in relationship, you got to pick up the phone and call somebody, or you got to just go and show up. And you'll feel really insecure about it. Because you won't know all the ins and outs of an issue. You won't know all the ins and outs of an organization. And you'll show up feeling really insecure like, what am I doing here? I'm not, I don't know what I'm doing. I you know, at the end of the day, this all comes from a sense of call and I, you know, this is really inappropriate for me as a theologian to do but I promise Moses felt the same way. I promise Jesus felt the same way. Who am I to show up here and do this thing? Who what in the world am I doing? I am just some person. But yet, this is where our faith really shines our relationship with God, to really lean on that sense of call. And that's why discernment is so important. That sense of call that some sense of, of being propelled out of our space into the movement of peace, having no clue what we're doing. But we show up and we learn, and we don't have the expectation that we know what we're doing. We simply have the expectation that God has asked me to be here, and I'm here, and I'm probably going to mess up and but I'm going to try really hard. And I mean, that's like the best advice I can give. And I know it sounds just totally inadequate, but that's what it is. It's our burning bush. It's our burning bush. You want me to do what

Elray Henriksen 1:03:59

Yeah, sorry, and and hopefully somebody is there to tell the tale afterwards, right? That's absolutely or a propagates. And, and, and this and this idea of hope, can be established. So thank you, Zac so much for being part of this follow up podcast to the 2020 European Peace Colloquy webinar series. You've given us some of your time, some important reflections, you're helping us discern, helping us. Give us some ideas about the simple steps we can take to start making a difference in the world, in our communities, in our neighborhoods, and just as people of faith, I do have a last question.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 1:04:44

Sure.

Elray Henriksen 1:04:46

I'm just like, how do we work with people of no faith?

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 1:04:50

So even even atheists are making a theological statement, right? So, but people have no faith, still have morals, ethics, and by They still have something that has shaped their principle of community of society, of civility. And so we always have to be really keenly thoughtful about ecumenical and interfaith work, knowing that this isn't the work of convincing people to think like you think or believe what you believe or become part of your church. This is the work of incarnation. So we're not, we're not getting into battles of beliefs. We are really, really becoming ambassadors of Matthew 25. And Matthew 25, is where Jesus shows up and he's like, Hey, where were y'all at when I was hungry and thirsty and all these other things. And the disciples like, What are you talking about? We've been believing all these things, and we've been, you know, off here doing the belief thing, and he's like the Gentiles, the non believers

that people have no faith. They incarnated what I taught you. They gave me water, they give me shelter, they give me clothing and Jesus points this out, right? Like Jesus makes a real pivotal statement to these disciples. You must embody, you must incarnate. This idea. This is not an intellectual exercise to be left in the halls of sanctuaries and cathedrals. This is a movement of incarnation to heal and transform a broken world. And so people's individual Now there may be relational moments on the outskirts of this work to have those conversations and engage in that and indeed that should happen. But we're missionally aligning ourselves to address hunger, poverty, human migration, climate change, whatever it is, and I can really only speak from a commune of Christ context because that's who I am. My faith calls me to embody that Matthew 25 idea. I'm not here to proselytize. I'm not here to baptize. I'm not here to convince that my faith is, is better than yours. I am here to clothe the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to give shelter to the shivering cold. That's my prerogative in this movement, all the other stuff that happens at other moments in my life as a disciple, but this work that we're doing, it's focused, it's clear, and it's about embodiment and incarnation.

Elray Henriksen 1:07:18

Thank you Zac for again, testifying to the importance of transformational encounters and, and meeting the other end, but not only that, but it seems like you know, being conscious about who the other is and what the other's needs are doing the work more than actually saying it or singing it. Or, you know, one way to end on this would be to that we from Doctrine and Covenants. I think it's 165. Now that says, Do not only sing and speak of Zion, but live love and share as Zion.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 1:07:57

Oh, don't leave out the best part Elray!

Elray Henriksen 1:07:59

Okay.

Zac Harmon-MacLaughlin 1:08:00

Which is the follow up of live, love and share as Zion. Those who strive to be visibly one in Christ among whom there are no poor or oppressed. Amen.

Elray Henriksen 1:08:10

Amen. Thank you so much for being part of this follow up podcast to the 2020 European peace Colloquy webinar series. Thank you for your time and your important reflections, and helping us identify those simple steps for us to start making a difference in the world. And thank you to all of our listeners. Join us next to listen to Ryan and Georgia Comins share their answers to the question, can peace begin on our plates, non violence and what we eat, as we all continue to explore together on many different Grounds for Peace.

Josh Mangelson 1:08:51

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