

ES 76 | Women's Ordination in Community of Christ | Interfaith Ministry  
Project Zion Podcast

Katie Langston 0:17

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Brittany Mangelson 0:59

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 6:41

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 11:13

I noticed that actually,

David Howlett 11:14

So there we go. That student did the research on her own. I didn't point her to that at all. So I mean, she found that by googling, and then it's really good writer. And it's intended for someone who has no background in Community of Christ to be able to understand, well, what's going on here who's just interested in the idea of women's ordination? Yeah, the website helps situate that a little bit more to.

Brittany Mangelson 11:36

Yes. And we will be sure to link that website in the show notes so you can get more background information on the project. And yeah, thank you so much, David, thank you for joining us in this collaboration. I'm really excited about it.

David Howlett 11:51

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

Annalie Gilbert 12:00

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

Lily McGartland 12:14

Hi, I'm Lily.

Annalie Gilbert 12:16

I'm Anna Lee.

Svetlana Roth 12:18

And I'm Svetlana. We're your hosts for this episode of women's rights. This season we are exploring the story of women's ordination in Community of Christ a church with a quarter million members 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 important ordinations, we're taking a look back on the journey towards women's ordination and Community of Christ. To do so we've interviewed some of the first women ordained women who went on to be leaders and Community of Christ.

Lily McGartland 12:50

Each episode in this series investigates a different topic and today in our sixth episode, we're going to look at issues of interfaith ministry. We asked these women to have reflect back on their experience across denominational lines with other women clergy and with denominations that do not permit women to be ordained.

Svetlana Roth 13:08

We initially asked our interviewees how they have served in ecumenical interfaith spaces and how people reacted in those spaces to their ordination. many religions in Christian

denominations do not ordain women. However, despite these differences between Community of Christ and other faiths, a variety of ecumenical relationships, connections and interactions exists between them. We wondered what these interactions were like for the ordained women we interviewed and whether or not they felt accepted and respected by those they connected with.

Jane Gardner 13:36

I serve often for the church in ecumenical ways. So for example, when 9/11 happened, the presidency of the church decided to open up our Auditorium in Kansas City to the community and said to me and one of the apostles asked if we would work with the Ministerial Alliance to plan something while that space was open for people to come in, because people were really upset and searching for answers after 9/11. And so I helped lead that effort and it was quite interesting. The Catholic Church, of course, was very present and I have really good relationships with the litigious and people involved in that community. And I really think it boils down to relationships because I had good relationships with them. They were not opposed to me being a minister, even though in their own church, women are not ordained.

Jane Gardner is the first woman to serve as presiding evangelists and Community of Christ. Marge tro, one of the most important figures in the fight for women's or a nation in the church also spoke about her interfaith interactions in the 70s and early 80s.

Unknown Speaker 15:04

Well, I said I was on the National Board of church, women united. I was on their ecumenical development team. And we were having a team meeting, went up to the airport to pick them up. And they said, you know, we got talking on the plane, and we realized we have never worshipped in a church of your faith. Would it be possible for us to come and worship at your church on Sunday? And so there was the one time when there was an intersection between women of my interfaith community and members of my

Unknown Speaker 15:45

Community of Christ community. Were there together,

Svetlana Roth 15:49

Charmaine chavalla Smith, who was among the first women ordained by the church in 1985, and now serves as the Community of Christ seminaries chaplain described her experiences serving among members other faiths.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:01

So one of my probably earliest involvements in an ecumenical setting, once I was ordained, was in Mount Pleasant, Michigan. And in the hospital there, they didn't have a full time chaplain. And so, various denominations in the area had banded together. And they had a training program. So that that basically they had the hospital covered all the time, with ministers from one denomination or another. And we had several in our congregation who were involved in the in that hospital chaplain program. And so that was one of the first opportunities I had as an

ordained person to be involved in, in ecumenical and community ministry. There was the ecumenical part as far as the fellow chaplains but then there was also the ecumenical part within, within the visits to patients, and of course, the main thing there was that we were not promoting our own denominations. We were present for the people and the need to pray with them or just be present with them.

Lily McGartland 17:18

And moving on to our second question. We asked Community of Christ ordained women if being ordained to change their perspective on other religions or denominations choices and opinions on women's ordination. In regard to the question, Jane Gardner responded,

Jane Gardner 17:32

when I look at other denominations, I think it's important to offer to share our experience. And I don't know I continue to have really interesting insights. So I went to SDI which is spiritual directors international conference, and almost everybody there were women. There were almost no men. And you know, spiritual director. is kind of grown up through the Catholic faith, the Catholic Church, but it has become more and more ecumenical. Well, it was. So I was so interested in hearing the women, the Catholic women talk about being spiritual directors, and the more I got to thinking about it, in my own perspective, I could not understand how women in the Catholic Church could justify is probably not the right word, but live with the fact that they could never be in the priesthood. They could never be ordained. But going to this conference, I'm listening to these Catholic women and I realized that through this spiritual direction Avenue, that they were expressing their calling their sense of, of ministry, and they were just doing it differently than I was. And even though they're their denomination doesn't allow women to be ordained. They were still finding ways to offer ministry. So I to me that was really has been eye opening, so that it is a you have to be preceded for any ministry to happen. That's not true.

Lily McGartland 19:09

ordained in 1992 Becky savage was the first woman to serve in the First Presidency in the church's history. She shared her perspective on women's ordination with us.

Unknown Speaker 19:19

I think if anything, I'm probably more sensitive to those who have a yearning for their own ordination. So how we walk with other denomination denominational women who are serving in ministry, and and have their own obstacles in run across their own issues.

Unknown Speaker 19:40

And we can be collaborative with them because we we are women who walk side by side with men in an interfaith and ecumenical way. So there are very few denominations who have ordained women. And so when you walk side by side with Other ordain women, you are colleagues and you find collaboration because you walk side by side in common with common issues. So in that sense, I think it's just more of a sensitivity and an empathy for other women

ordain women and for those who do not have an opportunity to be ordained because of the denominations in which they have their faith,

Lily McGartland 20:22

and finally, Charmaine Chavalla Smith explained her feelings on other religious groups opinions on women's ordination,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:29

I would say that perhaps initially, I was quite understanding of why denominations struggle with ordaining women. And, but I think the longer that it has become normative on the nation, the harder it is to imagine not having ordained women allows you to treat women equally. It's been harder to imagine that not having ordained women means you can still treat women as equal, probably become less patient, less tolerant over time, with denominations that, especially those who even refuse to, to begin the discussion to begin a discussion, you know, wherever it might take them. For those who've already determined that God is male, or, you know, whatever is the block or that women are less than or not as spiritual or not as good prayers or whatever it is they might use as their justification. I'm finding myself less and less able to respect that and that's maybe not a good thing on my part, but because it's just become so so ingrained in our denomination to see, see that need to be a distinction between men and women when it comes to bringing God's love to the world.

Lily McGartland 22:12

Each of these women in their own way, discuss the external and internal tension they face in their interactions with women, whether ordained or not of other denominations. The third

Annalie Gilbert 22:23

And final question we asked our interviewees was do you think that women's ordination has changed the relationship that Community of Christ has with the LDS church? What about other churches? Most of the answers we received focused primarily on the LDS church as opposed to other churches, and no two responses particularly echoed each other. Some responses such as Gwendolyn-Hawkes Blue's, the first African American woman ordained by the church, emphasize the positive relationship between the two denominations.

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 22:55

Very brief encounters brief encounters I've had with some woman woman at a, at a job wittmer society event I went to there was appreciation for the fact that women were being used in ministry in Community of Christ. You know, so I think that was a, there was a positiveness about their relationship with the women who were, who were priesthood members there. Overall, you know, I it's simply another way for those individuals to to see God's work in a faith community. I can't speak for how it affected those be individuals but I think positive.

Annalie Gilbert 24:02

Here Gwendolyn implies a positive coexistence or a level of respect without a desire to change the other denominations structure between the two denominations. Although we only have one perspective, from this response, we can conclude that there is a great level of respect between the two denominations as they view each other's systems of ministry, prioritizing each denominations relationship with God over the priesthood positions anyone can hold. Another perspective, which was introduced by Charmaine Chvala-Smith, is the idea that Community of Christ has become a safe exit from the LDS church for those who are bothered by the restrictions on priesthood

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:41

For some LDS folks, our church has been. I think this is a healthy way to look at it. I'm not sure that others do that, that we're kind of a waystation there that we're a place where they can come. They can recover, they can be reminded, they are loved by God, there's a bigger world out there that that can can and wants to wreck wants to recognize them as Christians and their commitments as Christian. I think we've become realistic with the idea that we are not going to be the place where we call them LDS seekers. So the Latter-day or Mormon seekers. We are, we may not be what some LDS seekers need permanently, but we can be a waystation that gives them a safe exit point and can help them start to adapt to a bigger Christian world. And sometimes we'll be able to help them move on to a denomination that will be a good fit for them, or maybe if they decide not to align with another denomination, at least to know that there are people who believe that God is a loving God, and that they can still have a relationship with God. And they may have to let go of some of the images of God that they have, but that the experience of God that they've had is not invalid, and that they can perhaps, let themselves be known as a loved person to themselves by God, and so we can we can give them that

Annalie Gilbert 26:25

Charmaine's response implies a level of discord between the two churches that Gwendolyn did not allude to. Well, this quote speaks positively of the relationship between Community of Christ and those leaving the LDS Church indicates the fundamental differences in priesthood structure as a point of contention between the LDS church and Community of Christ. Carolyn Brock, once active in formation of the churches, ministries and now retired, also points to this discord and discussing her own view of the LDS church as Community of Christ moved towards women's ordination and the LDS Church maintained their patriarchal structure.

Carolyn Brock 27:01

If anything, it only strengthened my idea that they that maybe the LDS Church remained more and has remained more patriarchal and that they took some of the things that we may be thought of as distortions that came out of the novel period. And kept those not all of those but many of those. And I, I see those as maybe distortions or patriarchal claims of movements in the tradition. So, I might even be more critical, if you will, in my thinking towards them.

Annalie Gilbert 27:45



Between these three responses, we can see that there is a wide range in women's views of the relationship between the LDS church and Community of Christ. Some view the relationship as respectful and distant while others sense some tension between the two denominators

Svetlana Roth 28:01

In our next episode changes, we'll look at how women's ordination has impacted these women's lives and how it has changed the denomination as a whole.

Annalie Gilbert 28:17

That concludes our podcast for today. Special thanks to Jane Gardner, Charmaine Chvala-Smith, Marge Troeh Wendelin, Becky Savage and Carolyn Brock. 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. See you next time on women's rights.

Josh Mangelson 29:03

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