ES 77 | Women's Ordination in Community of Christ | Changes

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.

Linda Booth 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?

Linda Booth 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?

Linda Booth 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?

Linda Booth 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.

Linda Booth 11:14

So there we go. With that student did that research on her own? I didn't point her to that at all. So I mean, she found that by googling, and then to the 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.

Linda Booth 12:01

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

Hi, we're Zoe House, Clara Brill-Carlat and Esther Kearns. We're your hosts for this episode of women's rights. This season we're exploring the story of women's ordination and Community of Christ, a church with a quarter million members formally 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 and Community of Christ. To do so we've interviewed women ordained in the first decade after the 1985 policy change, women who went on to be leaders and Community of Christ. Each episode in this series investigates a different topic, and today we're going to look at the theme of change changes. How has ordination affected and changed the women who are ordained in the late 80s and early 90s? And how has women's ordination changed Community of Christ as a whole?

Brittany Mangelson 13:10

We're going to start off by hearing from several ordain women about how their personal faith has changed since their ordination. Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue responded,

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 13:19

I don't know that my faith has changed. I think it's, well, if anything, the feeling I might get is that God can use anyone, you know? So I don't know if that's so much my faith changing as at a more personal level, embracing that understanding. I mean, it's one thing to have it at a head level and it's another to have it as both an emotional And spiritual levels,

Unknown Speaker 14:01

Along with Gwendeloyn, many of the women seem to observe a difference between their faith, quote unquote, changing completely versus their faith developing, growing and maturing. Charmaine Chvala-Smith expressed this distinction well.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:17

My own faith is just keeps changing. I mean, not, not in the most elemental ways, I think, at the foundation is still this absolute assurance that God is present and loving, and, and calling us to be our, our, our best selves in an offering to help us do that. So those pieces haven't changed. But, you know, I think it was trying to think of a specific and I think, like in regard to prayer, that's a place where my faith has changed and is still changing.

Unknown Speaker 14:58

Many of the ordained women talks about their faith journeys as them becoming more aware of and receptive to the spirit. Gwendolyn observe this in her own life.

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 15:08

One of the things that challenges me always and I hope, in a sense that never goes away is equipping myself as much as I can spiritually to, to be open again to God's Spirit to guide me in whatever it is I'm doing. And that's a work in progress.

Unknown Speaker 15:46

One's own faith is highly personal and intimate. So we're very grateful for being able to listen to these ordain women's insights into their ever evolving spiritual journeys.

Linda Booth 15:56

Next, let's find out what advice and support these ordained women would based on their own experiences to other women who are newly called to the priesthood, Jane Gardner explains that deciding whether to accept a call to the priesthood requires careful thought as well as patience.

Jane Gardner 16:11

My probably number one advice would be to not be in a hurry. And to really give it a lot of prayer and thought, and see if it's a good fit, see if it makes sense in their life. And sometimes God calls us when it's uncomfortable. It makes us stretch.

Linda Booth 16:35

Charmaine agrees that becoming ordained is a serious, humbling process. At the same time, she advises women to not let their ordination status define them completely.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:44

Don't let this determine all of who you are. It's part of who you are. And it's part of your relationship with God, but your relationship with God needs to be outside of that as well. So so so keep being open to just to be being deepened spiritually beyond that call. It's not the end all, there was a time in our church where being ordained was a bit of a an end of all, it proved that you had value. And don't, don't let it be that because it can hold you back.

Unknown Speaker 17:22

A final piece of advice for women who are newly called or ordained is to find a spiritual mentor. Linda booth serves in this role and describes how she makes herself a resource for women who have been called,

Linda Booth 17:33

The first thing I do is share with them my testimony of their call, my assurance that God has divinely called them and we talk about it. We talk about their fears, and we talk about their excitement, and all the different feelings that they might be experiencing. And then we end with a prayer where I pray a prayer blessing for each one. Then I continue to pray for them and they know that I'm praying for them. And and I always allow myself to be open to a phone call or an email from someone who says, I have this experience and this has been asked to me, what do you think I should do?

So now that we've heard the advice that women in the priesthood would like to give to newly ordained women, let's find out what work still needs to be done to make Community of Christ more equitable and inclusive.

Unknown Speaker 18:30

The women interviewed for this podcast series felt that while great strides had been taken place, to make the Community of Christ more equitable and inclusive, more steps still needed to be taken. Gwendolyn talked about how a greater effort could have been taken by the Community of Christ to help newly ordained women, especially those with further marginalized identities to move into leadership roles.

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 19:01

There were no particular, you know, efforts made to include me, but neither do I know how much they got together. So as I said, I have to leave the responsibility on both those. Perhaps I could have said, Hey, you know, I'm over here dealing with this you got any ideas?

Unknown Speaker 19:23

She suggested that the church should provide a clear structure to help newly ordained women move into their roles. Gwendolyn also hopes that the Community of Christ improves in the support of marginalized identities.

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 19:41

If the idea of a woman of color being in the priesthood, did not say to them, hey, maybe she needs a little more help than some of the rest of us. Do. You know, I don't know what what I did not go to the heads. But I know I was the only woman of color in the mission center

Unknown Speaker 20:03

Gwendolyn talked about the role of spiritual training, saying that,

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 20:09

I think there's a lot of value in having that more formal training

Unknown Speaker 20:17

Jane feels that,

Jane Gardner 20:19

We have work to do. And to help women see themselves in these roles.

Unknown Speaker 20:27

She talked about the importance of encouraging women to ask questions of,

Jane Gardner 20:34

What does it mean to offer yourself in service and ministry? And pragmatically Are you able to do it? And and I think at the heart of it, do you feel the call? Do you feel like God's asking you to move in this direction.

Unknown Speaker 20:54

Gwendolyn also reflected on hopeful signs demonstrated by an increase in diversity in high level church positions.

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 21:02

Now for many years, as I said on a previous conversation, when I would go to conference, especially when I was younger, you would look up on the rostrum of leadership, and you'd see white men and that was it. period that broaden to be some men of color very slowly. And then, within the last, gosh, 10-15 years, women appeared in leading class apostles. And and as I said, this is the second Stassi Cramm is now the second woman who has been a part of the First Presidency of the church. So the roles have been open. I mean, once it was open, And now I don't know, I would trace from the very beginning of women's call in the late 80s to now I don't know how rapidly that occurred, but it has occurred. You know that women were seen in every role.

Unknown Speaker 22:18

Gwendolyn also talks about the importance of increasing the inclusivity of members opinions. One way this is being done is that,

Gwendolyn Hawkes Blue 22:28

Now at conference when there are issues that are particularly sensitive or around which people can have pretty intense emotional reactions. There are efforts to work toward more consensus. And by that I mean not up down Yes, no votes, but putting the question or concern there. And, and having the opportunity to have full support, limited support, no support, you know, varying degrees. And that approach has been taken with regard to open communion, or was taken rather, looking at questions about sexual orientation.

Unknown Speaker 23:29

She felt that taking this type of approach would help the church become more inclusive for his members going forward. Charmaine talked about how second wave feminism and women's ordination in the 1980s began as a process of revealing blind spots in the church and wider culture and this process needs to continue.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:57

I think the movement that That feminism started making happen in our church needs to spread to other blind spots that we have, you know, I say that any individual or any institution always has blind spots. We just don't know what they are yet. And they are often limiting the ministry we can bring or how or, or blinding us to how we see other people, and that there's always a need to keep recognizing our blind spots.

Unknown Speaker 24:34

She continued to reflect on what this meant for women in the church and American culture.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:44

But I think as far as women are concerned, we are we're in a time in the, in this culture where we've been going backwards. We've been going backwards so quickly, as far as the right to women. And right now there's parts of culture that are threatening, threatening women threatening children, threatening people of color. immigrants. And, you know, my hope is that things like the struggle of to ordain women in a, in a denomination that was not prone towards that kind of change, and would give us eyes and a heart to be sensitive to what equality can look like and what it needs to look like.

Unknown Speaker 25:38

Finally, Charmaine thought this search for equality has continued in the churches present day, inclusive policies on gender identity. However, she noted

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:53

Unless we hang on to the recognition that it's not a fair world. It's a world in which those with power continue to make sure they have power. And that means there's somebody who's less than you. And that's and if we don't question that, then then we've lost some of the momentum that where we've been.

Unknown Speaker 26:23

As we've heard today, many changes have come out of the ordination of women in the Community of Christ, both on our church by level and on the individual level of the first waves of women, who were called to the priesthood in the late 1980s and early 1990. Although the work is not complete in the church, during the 35 years since women's ordination began, the Community of Christ has made significant strides towards inclusion and equity.

Unknown Speaker 27:02

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Josh Mangelson 27:41

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