

Katie Langston 00:16

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Carla Long 00:59

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long, and I am super duper duper excited about our guest today. She's a very dear friend, and she's from the land down under and her name is Sue Palmer. Hi, Sue.

Sue Palmer 01:16

Hello, Carla, how are you?

Carla Long 01:18

I'm so good. I'm so glad to see you. So Sue, we all want to know, tell us about yourself. Tell us who you are.

Sue Palmer 01:27

Well, um, my name is Sue Palmer. And I've been the pastor of the Open Door congregation in Sydney, Australia for the last 21 years is. And that's I'm sitting in the Open Door building at the moment, which is a shared building. It's a preschool building, but we have access to a space at the end of the building, which is our worship space. So we've rainbow cross above us. And then we've got just a shared facility outside for a four year and coffee. And it's very laid back. It's not like a regular church building, which is kind of good in a way because it's very informal. Yeah.

Carla Long 02:17

So that always makes me feel more comfortable to the informal-ness. Sometimes, you know, like, when you have pews and a pulpit and a stage, it just feels a little bit like you have to be straight like this. And that's not who you are. You don't want to have to do that. It's easy. It's nice to be easy and open and free. So I'm glad I'm happy about that for you.

Sue Palmer 02:40

Let's see, yeah, we're young, we have a vision statement that talks about how our congregation is like, the stable that Jesus was born, where it's comfy and cozy, maybe a bit smelly. Hopefully not, but just very real, and where people can come and kick off their shoes, and feel like it's okay just to be who you are and feel at home. So, and obviously to the stable is a great image because it's, it represents new life and new beginnings. And, and that's something to that's very important to us as we journey with Jesus in our lives. And, and, you know, look at what that transitioning and that change means for us. So, yeah,

Carla Long 03:42

I love that. I love that analogy. So you've already told us a little bit about Open Door. Tell us a little bit more about Open Door what is interesting about open door what's fun about Open Door, all that stuff?

Sue Palmer 03:54

Okay, well, open door has never really been like other Community of Christ congregations, mainly because we started out as a coming out group 21 years ago, 1999 when Matthew Naylor was our region president, he put a small group of us together and asked if we would be interested in doing something to help the LGBT community. And, and so this some premises that the church owns out in western Sydney was available and we kind of became a bit like hermit crabs and moved into this building. And we've been here ever since. But we started off meeting on a Thursday night. We advertised as a spirituality and coming out group. And we had one new lady come along on the first night, who name's Kathy, and she thought it was tarot cards, because we had said it was spirituality. And yeah, she was a bit disappointed because we didn't have any tarot cards, but she really enjoyed our time together, we just laughed and had coffee and talked and really got to know each other. And she kept coming back for the next six months of that year. And by the end of that 1999, we had decided that our name was going to be Open Door. And by then I think we'd started to meet on a Sunday evening. And we only had the one person coming along for that six months. So in December, we had a second person turned up. And this was very exciting, because it meant that our numbers have now doubled pretty much. And and that's the way it's always been with Open Door, we we don't have huge numbers of people coming along. But those who do come are it's really very much about relationship. And suffice to say, Kathy, our first person who came along, really liked our second person that came along Megan. And by the time of the Mardi Gras parade, they had become an item. So well, first two people hooked up, and and they're still together today, which is such a great story and such a great way to introduce Open Door. It's, but it is more than a dating place. But it's a wonderful story, the first two women that came along to our Well, it wasn't really it wasn't a congregation at that point, but over the years, there has been an evolving, and by 2008, we were officially recognized and opened as a congregation of Community of Christ. Yeah.

Carla Long 06:58

Oh, this is a very good start. I like this story a lot. So. So how many do people do you have like any on any given Sunday?

Sue Palmer 07:06

The numbers fluctuate, I guess, with COVID this year, and numbers have kind of grown because we've been online. So because we've had people chiming in from all over the country, which has been really lovely. But before COVID, we were probably getting 10 to 20 people on a Sunday night. So it's not huge numbers. So, but I guess over the years to I've been there's been times when I've been very concerned about numbers, and I guess, most pastors, our numbers are important. It's one of the first questions people always ask me is how many people come? And I'm coming to realize that it's really not about how many people are there. It's more about our relationship with each other and our relationship with God. And you know, how we're we're looking after each other.

Carla Long 07:14

So I completely agree it is all about those relationships. Sometimes in a bigger congregation, I feel like the relationships are not as strong, really. So I mean, Adam Wade actually once said to me, he's like, "I don't think we were ever meant to be a big church. I think that we are meant to be a church that loved each other and loved every single person." And I'm like, Oh, I can't believe that came out of Adam Wade's mouth, like really?

Sue Palmer 08:27

Well, I think that Jesus chose 12 disciples, and 212. So that kind of gives me some hope.

Carla Long 08:37

Absolutely. So you still meet on Sunday night, so you meet on Sunday mornings.

Sue Palmer 08:44

No Sunday nights, we did start Sunday mornings, just in the last 12 months, only because one of our congregations had closed and there was some members who kind of needed somewhere to worship. So we, we tried a Sunday morning, and we may go back to that again, too, but we'll see what happens.

Carla Long 09:07

So are you still do you still consider yourself like a coming out group? Or are you a group that really supports the LGBTQIA+ community? What does that look like?

Sue Palmer 09:21

Um, I don't know, really, if we ever were coming at group because we never really had people coming along. I mean, we have had over the years there have been people that have been in that coming out phase. But we definitely have always been an LGBTIQA congregation and but we're a congregation that accepts and loves people, no matter who they are. And one of our team members and friends Denise, once said, you know, we take anybody. And she kind of said it jokingly, but it's true. And we try to live by that we do we take anybody and we we've had people from such a wide variety of backgrounds, faith backgrounds know, pretty much every denomination, you could think of every religion you can think of has, at some point being represented, you know, congregation and, and people from non faith background who had no idea what churches about, but just want to connect with people and be loved really. And that's really one of the the joys of Open Door is the diversity of a thought. And, you know, our number of, you know, ages ago now, but the offering was getting collected one night, and the person collecting it had a can of Coke in their hand as they walked around. You know, and another night, I remember, one of our ministers from another congregation was attending and going to give some ministry that night, we were sitting in a circle, and it was after six o'clock. And she said to me, what time are we supposed to start? And I said, we have started. Because there are still people outside, there are people that are doing their thing, you know, and it was just that evolution of these groups group coming into being a congregation has been very exciting and fun. Yeah.

Carla Long 11:39

It sounds like you do things in a little bit of a different way. And I love that I love I always encourage, like my worship planners and people I'm like, do something crazy. I'm totally fine with it. So what does like?

Do you have something called a normal worship service? Are they all kind of different? Are they What's it like to worship at the Open Door?

Sue Palmer 12:00

We do have a format and again, the format has evolved of us, we always end with prayers, we always end with people expressing a need for prayer or something that they know of, you need prayer, who need God's blessing. And then we have some quiet prayer time. And people can pray out loud if they want to. So but since we've been on Zoom, it's been a little bit more sanitized. But we hope to get back to the messy, unpredictable church once we start gathering again, physically. But yeah, that is part of our format. And we are very interactive, we enjoy hearing from each other during our time together. And I think that's probably one of the important things that people coming into this congregation is a sense of needing to be heard, and needing to find a place to fit in and needing to be useful finding up. Yeah, a niche that is that is that they can do this and find that purpose. So yeah. I guess that's what it is. It's that interaction, which gives people an opportunity to, to speak and, and be heard by others.

Carla Long 13:34

You know, I have found that to be very true that, you know, when you were a kid, it seemed like it was really easy to have conversation with people and have important conversation with people. But it feels like as you get older, those times are fewer and farther between. And like, people don't listen to each other anymore. And there's just not really a chance to sit down and like really, really talk and have someone know who you truly are. And so what you offer Sue is a gift. It's a gift for people to get to speak from their heart and speak their truth and be listened to I I just love that you do that. I think that's a really, really important ministry that we think might not be important, but I think it might be the most important.

Sue Palmer 14:23

Yeah, we've got to be very careful to guard that and, and not let that disappear. Because we like any congregation, it's much easier just to have somebody get up the front and, you know, run an order of service. You know, and we've been guilty of that too, especially on zoom. And, and pretty soon, you know, we don't have we just would pretty much have an audience of people rather than a congregation of worshipers who are taking an active part in the worship and there's a big difference there. That is the challenge is to maintain that interactivity so that people are owning the worship themselves and engaging in that worship time together.

Carla Long 15:13

So, how do you facilitate that? What kinds of things do you do? Do you ask questions? Do you sit in a circle? Do you still sing hymns together? How, how is this whole thing facilitated?

Sue Palmer 15:29

Over the years, I guess I'm quite often the person presiding or facilitating, and, and it's really just about sort of doing what you're doing now. And, you know, offering questions for people to, to talk about have an open ended question and off we go. And, and then try to rein them in when, when it gets all too much. And, and it can be quite fun. And it is exciting, because you just don't know what people are going to say next. But it's really great, because that's how people do get to know each other. And when

we have a congregation, he that they haven't grown up with each other. Unlike other congregations where you've known each other for many, many years, you've known their parents, or you've known their children, and here we've got people coming in for the first time who don't know each other at all. And so giving people time to talk and get to know each other is really important. Yeah.

Carla Long 16:35

I think it's, I think it's the most one of the most important things. So do you do you follow like the lectionary scripture? Do you talk about the Bible? Do you have like any kind of Bible study or a book club or anything like that, that happens, either?

Sue Palmer 16:54

So we do follow Community of Christ lectionary each week. And, um, you know, we have, we do we have a, usually, lately, we have someone that gives the message, and we have the Prayer for Peace, and we have all of those elements of worship that are fairly traditional. But that's only been recently and, again, you know, this whole notion of letting the spirit breathe is, is so important, so that we don't get tied down to just, this is the way you do church. And, and letting that openness be there so that people feel, can feel connected. And in that prayer time, being able to bring out ourselves, you know, before this cross behind me and, and remember that, you know, we are loved with a love that is amazing, and that this God is a God who does intervene in our lives. And, and just come together in prayer to to our loving God is such an important part of what we do, and probably the pinnacle of Sunday's together. So that's, we also have a Tuesday night group called ESP, which is Eat, Study, Pray. And we don't do much eating online, but it's just a chance for us to do a little more study together on a particular theme or topic, and have great time together. Our social times have been always very important too. We often have dinners together or, or catch ups, coffee and things like that. But not so much lately, but hopefully we'll get back to that again, too. Yeah. So, so those are pretty much the things that that keep us going as a congregation. And we are looking to this visioning process which was begun by the Sydney pastors a few years ago. And we are looking to the future of where we're heading in terms of are we going to be staying here in Cranebrook, which is out suburb here in Western Sydney? Or are we looking to maybe even one day move premises and find a place that's closer into our Penrith CBD where we could perhaps open more of a cafe style building where we can be there seven days a week, as a seven day a week church and connect even more with people who are sensing that isolation and need for a faith community.

Carla Long 19:53

Sue, that sounds awesome. And I can already picture you in that cafe church setting. Just chatting with people and helping them feel welcome and loved. Oh my gosh, I just got chills thinking about that, that it would be so cool. You know, I don't know if you found this in an Open Door, but in Salt Lake City congregation where I'm the pastor. People come to us all the time from certain other denominations. And they really find the Enduring Principles to be really wonderful. And I don't know if that has been true for your congregation, but the Enduring Principle of worth of all persons and all are called. And a lot of those have just been so meaningful to our people. Has that been true in the open door congregation as well?

Sue Palmer 20:43

Yeah. For those who have invested some time and have stuck around, because, you know, we have people that come and go, and we have people that have come and stayed. And for those that have come and stayed and have gotten to know Community of Christ a little bit better. They love the Doctrine and Covenants, and they love the Enduring Principles, they love our Mission Initiatives. And so, so good, you know, we, in fact, the other night for our Bible study, we looked at the mission initiatives and, and it's, it's great, because the people that we're interacting with are people who are not, who have never known Community of Christ before. And they finding this church to be a gem. You know, so many people have come from denominations where they've been rejected, because of their sexuality, or, or whatever. And here's a little church where they're finding their place. And, and where it's where there's an openness to God. And yeah, and there's an openness to new ways of thinking. And, and it's okay to think differently. And people still love you, even though you may not all agree with each other. And I know sometimes that's not the case. But you know, but it is, it's true, like we, we don't always agree with one another, but we put our relationship with each other at the top of the ladder. And that's, that's different. And, you know, I've grown up in the church, and I, this is so much that I realized, now I've taken for granted over the years, just from mixing with people from open door, who just they have no idea that there's this connection that we have in our church with each other that is just unparalleled, we have this relationship and this love that is really amazing and very special.

Carla Long 22:56

I totally agree with you. Since being here in Salt Lake, you know, you know, women in the priesthood, we we started ordaining women in the priesthood in Community of Christ in when I was seven years old. And so there's never really been a time in my life when I didn't think that I could be a minister or when I didn't see women up front. And so I've never in my life, thought that I was a second class citizen at church. But millions, if not billions, of people in the world think of themselves women, for instance, or people who are LGBTQIA, or whatever think of themselves as second class citizens. And that is simply not true in Community of Christ. And it is mind blowing for people, like it blows people's minds. When I was pregnant, I told people that I was the only pregnant Bishop in all of Utah. And they thought that was just hilarious, you know, to have a woman Bishop who was pregnant, that's crazy, you know. And so, I mean, just just blew people away to have, and, like, I there are women in the congregation who look at me and they're like, I want my daughter to grow up the way you grew up, Carla, I want them to know that they are, they can do anything they want to do and that they are welcome to and so on and so forth. So I think we are incredibly blessed, or however you want to call it to get to grow up in a place where we always felt our worth. And we knew our worth.

Sue Palmer 24:24

Yeah, very true. And, you know, I recall back in 2016 here when marriage equality was getting voted on and, you know, said to our mission, President Ben, can we please once it was voted or in Australia when we went through that whole process of you know, all the yes campaign and all the the huge no campaign that was going on, and it's just a really horrible time to be honest. And remember talking we've been insane if it does come through in Australia, the yes vote wins. Do we have to go through another vote with the church? Because we got voted on for ordination. We've been voted on, you know, in the country here now. Can you spare us another vote because it's horrible. And thankfully, because we'd already been through that process with ordination, I don't know, but we didn't have to do another

vote. And, and that was just really great. And we, um, we now have marriage equality as well, which is terrific. Yeah.

Carla Long 25:35

I remember that day in Australia, I celebrated with you from far, far away, of course, but I celebrated with you because that journey was a long journey in Australia. And like you said, painful? Was it hard for the people in Open Door to go through that?

Sue Palmer 25:49

Yeah, we, we, we, we talked about it a lot, because there was so much hate going on, especially in social media that we, we talked about, you know, the need to stay off social media and just don't get caught up with it, and all of that, but, you know, so we got through it. And we were thankful for that in the end. But it was soon after that I have got one little story to share with you about a lady named Amanda. And I spoke to her prior to the podcast to ask her permission to share her story. She started coming along to Open Door probably maybe two and a half years ago now. And it was a psychologist that had told her about Open Door because Amanda was right at the very beginning stage of transitioning from male to female. And she had attempted to into life a couple of, well, not sure how many times but she really needed to have some support in her life. And I remember the first time I had a phone call from her and, and she was very worried about coming to the church, she was very anxious about coming to the church, dressed as a woman, and I encouraged her and told her that you know, she will be fine, it will be safe and supportive. And it would be great to come as a woman because that way people will get to know you straightaway for who you really are. And and that's what she did. She braved it that first time for so many newcomers turning up and walking through that door. The first time is very scary, but she did it. And since that time, she's just blossomed and has become an integral part of that congregation and was baptized earlier on in this year, up at the green Cathedral at up at Foster there where pastor Wendy is. And so we were just able to sharing that baptism with the wider church community and and it was just very special. And then she and another special person in our congregation were confirmed the following week here. I just wanted to let you know that that's just one of so many stories of people over the years who have come and found a connection with an acceptance that God's love is for all people and that the churches doors are open. So I just hope that we can continue to be that open door for for people like Amanda who just desperately need. This is love. I don't know if you've you probably have sung him number 350 years one of its become one of our best favorite ones. Top 10 "We are a family have faith. We have a savior whose kind. We lift each other up, we leave no one behind. And it goes on for the least of us would stumble we all feel the pain. Community of Christ is our name." And we'd love that hymn we hope that we can live up to those words in it too.

Carla Long 29:13

Sue you're making me cry. I loved hearing the story of Amanda I and I love that she was baptized at the Green Cathedral. Oh, but like I can picture it in my head. And it just makes me so happy to. But she has found a place. I think that if the only thing Community of Christ ever does is help people find a place and a spiritual home, then we have done exactly what we're called to do. And it sounds like that's exactly what you're doing at Open Door.

Sue Palmer 29:46

Thanks be to God. And I know God has kept the door open for these many years. And I'm I pray that the good Lord will continue to do that. Not just here but around the whole the whole world. We are going to continue to, to be faithful to God and just as God is faithful to us.

Carla Long 30:06

Absolutely. And so I, I know that it's a difficult job to be a pastor. I know. And you've done it a lot longer than I've had. I've only done it for two years. But I just want to say publicly how much I appreciate what you do. It's a it's a really hard, but it's such an important job and to have someone like you, who is kind, compassionate and understanding, be a part of a ministry that is can be hard times. And challenging at times is just so wonderful. So thank you so much for doing what you do.

Sue Palmer 30:46

Thank you. Thank you so much. And thanks for having me on you today, too.

Carla Long 30:51

Yeah, I really enjoyed talking to you. So before we sign off, is there anything else that you want to tell me about Open Door that I didn't ask you or that you wanted to talk about and I forgot?

Sue Palmer 31:03

No, I think I'm good.

Carla Long 31:05

Well, you've already made me cry. So I'm gonna go ahead and check that one off and have a wonderful worship service tomorrow.

Sue Palmer 31:15

And you too, well the following day, I would imagine.

Carla Long 31:19

It's Friday here. It's Saturday, there. Sue is wonderful to talk to you. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Sue Palmer 31:26

Thank you. Thank you Carla and God bless.

Josh Mangelson 31:36

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