

Josh Mangelson 00:17

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

Carla Long 00:33

Hi, everyone, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long. And today I'm with a very, very special guest, a dear dear friend of mine named David Anderson, Dave and I work together in Europe for three years, I think, three years?

Dave Anderson 00:50

Yeah, it was.

Carla Long 00:51

I'm assuming those were the best three years of your life, David.

Dave Anderson 00:54

Absolutely. They were not only interesting, but they were the most exciting, too. I never knew what to expect, Carla.

Carla Long 01:05

Dave, I will never forget a moment when you and I were riding in the back of the car. And we were being so silly because we were so exhausted. And the driver accidentally maybe got a 200 euro ticket for speeding because he was listening to us.

Dave Anderson 01:19

Yeah, that was a long trip and we were kind of punchy weren't we? But it was was, OUR supervising Apostle at the time still talks about that. Yeah.

Carla Long 01:31

Oh, great. Oh, was he sitting in the front seat?

Dave Anderson 01:33

Yeah, he was sitting in the passenger seat.

Carla Long 01:36

Oh, yeah, he was. We were very punchy and but Europe just brings out the punchiness. And you sometimes let's be honest, so I've already told them a little bit about you, Dave, I told him that you worked in Europe, but you have a much cooler, bigger story than that. So why don't you just introduce yourself?

Dave Anderson 01:52

Okay, well, thanks. It's really a privilege to be here with you, Carla. I listen to the podcast frequently. And I always enjoy listening and, and even discussing the topic with others. So it's really a privilege to be here. My name is Dave Anderson. I was, my friends can call me Big Dave. Of course, when there's multiple days, I'm always the Big Dave. I mean, I take pride in that very much. If you know anything about my stature, it's kind of a play on words. But bigness comes from many other definitions. Well, I'm currently president of the high priests quorum. I'm doing so on a volunteer basis, because I have officially retired from full time at church appointment on 1 June of this year. And I loved serving the church and a full time capacity. But I also love working in the church and with the church in a volunteer basis. Church appointment was my second career, the first career I served in the US Air Force in various capacities. I live in Central Oregon, and been here for a couple years. But before that I lived in Missouri and all the places I've counted, could count 25 different places around the world that I've lived at. But anyway, it's good to be with you all. And we're not talking about me, we're talking about the important topic of whatever you want to talk about Carla.

Carla Long 03:25

Oh, whatever I want to talk about. This is exciting. Oh, gosh, I have like 14 ideas already. But I mean, we already talked about what we're going to talk about. But I do want to say one of the reasons I think that you're called Big Dave is because of your incredibly big heart. Dave is a wonderful person to work with and a wonderful minister. And I'm just so excited to be on this podcast with you, Dave, thanks so much for saying yes.

Dave Anderson 03:47

Well, thank you. I you know, I did go get a heart scan one time and the lady that was giving it to me, she says, Well, you can be assured that your heart is not two times too small.

Carla Long 03:58

Oh, no, you're not grinchy. So the topic that we are going to be discussing today, which I haven't even mentioned yet, is all about discernment. Now, discernment has been a word in the church that has circled around the church for the last, I don't know, 5, 6, 7 years or something. And sometimes I think people understand what it means. And sometimes they don't understand what it means. So let's talk a little bit about discernment. But we're really going to be talking specifically about discernment in the World Church Leadership Council. The World Church Leadership Council is made up of the I'm sure I'm not going to get them all the Presiding Bishopric, the Council of 12, the First Presidency and some other...?

Dave Anderson 04:40

It's comprised of myself as the President of the High Priests quorum, the Presiding Evangelist, the World Church Secretary, the Senior President of 70, and the Director of Human Resource Ministries, and occasionally, the General Counsel of the Church, as well as the members of the Council of Presidents of 70 or the Standing High Council and also are invited into the conversation.

Carla Long 05:04

So that's a lot of people. That's what makes up the Community of Christ World Church Leadership Council. And so they have been entering into this discernment a lot in order to help kind of steer the church into a direction. So, Dave, first of all, could you give us your definition of what you see discernment is?

Dave Anderson 05:26

Sure, you know, discernment is kind of the term of the day, so to speak. And I think it's really important to have a clarification, what it is and what it isn't. For me, fundamentally, discernment is about a deeply and faithfully listening for God's vision. In our day, I think one of the good authors who described discernment was a woman by the name of Ruth Haley Barton, who says that discernment is an ever increasing capacity to see the work of God in the midst of our human lives. So the intent in discernment is to align ourselves with whatever God is doing in our world.

Carla Long 06:19

I love that definition. And while the definition sounds super easy, I think we both know that it is not super easy. Well, it just takes a lot of effort, I think, and a lot of maybe concentrated effort is that would you say that it takes a lot of concentrated effort to be in discernment?

Dave Anderson 06:38

I think you're right. I think that the term itself is kind of a simple term, your words there that we understand. But it's not an easy quality in which to do. In fact, one of the first articles I read about discernment was actually, I think, in the mid 90s, written by Sharon Sperry, and Karen Brock, in the Herald, and it was about discernment. And one of the things that they said, I really feel is important, for me at least is discernment is a gift. We cannot lead through deep listening and faithfully listening, we listen for God's vision or God's desire, God's calling our lives. But it's really a gift that God gives to us, that we want more and that we begin to see this vision. So it has both a very personal, but also a collective aspect. And discernment is a process of kind of enlightenment are a process of ever increasing capacity to see more and more what God's vision in our world is, both are necessary.

Carla Long 07:53

I love that. Because I love the idea that discernment is a gift from God. It's not, it's freely given. It's there, we don't have to do anything for it. God is just always offering it I and, and all we have to do is accept it, right?

Dave Anderson 08:12

Accept it, and we need to watch it, and to deeply listen for it. Because discernment has a lot to do with shedding our ego or our desire for our own agenda, and listening for God's agenda. Discernment has a lot to do with acknowledgement of releasing our agenda to hear God's agenda. And there are certain kind of, I would say, attitudes or principles we need to engage in and discernment. And one of those is called spiritual freedom, or what the nation spirituality would call nation indifference. But it's basically a stance where we acknowledge that we want and desire deeply to follow God's agenda and not our own.

Carla Long 09:06

Oh, gosh, I don't I think that I've heard the phrase spiritual freedom. But could you talk a little bit more about that? What is spiritual freedom?

Dave Anderson 09:14

Well, it's a it's a stance, it's a perspective. So spiritual freedom is really the desire of the Divine will, as discovered by the person endeavoring to practice spiritual freedom, and setting aside matters of our own ego in desires, our own matters of feelings of politics and our own personal opinion or personal interest. And it basically says, Our most intense desire is the freedom to accept what God wants and desires in the world. And that if we do it effectively frees us releases us. Lot of the anxiety that we have in our world. So the goal is to tap into this desire and movement of the Holy Spirit, and to just to be kind of free of the burden of trying to do things on our own. It's listening to God, acknowledging, we want to follow God's agenda. And if we're doing that faithfully, we've we struggle with it. But then we're released in from the anxiety of trying to kind of build things or try to do things, rather than we're being and following God's agenda. And it's really kind of a powerful concept and very simple, but not easy concept.

Carla Long 10:42

Yeah, that is a really powerful concept. I, I don't know if I've ever really thought about it like that before. But you brought out something that I've never, yeah, I've never really thought about. So thanks, Dave. That's awesome. So let's get back to the idea of discernment. When it comes to the World Church Leadership Council. You've been involved with the World Church Leadership Council now for a number of years, maybe seven years or so something about seven years. And for you, why do you think it's really important that the world church leadership council practices this discernment?

Dave Anderson 11:14

Well, the World Church Leadership Council agenda is started or created by the First Presidency, and the World Church Leadership Council began this very specific discernment process, because of President Veazey, his comment to the World Church Budget Committee on, you know, the necessary changes in the future. And he felt a sense that the church needed to go through this metamorphosis. And we began to as a World Church Leadership Council began to reflect on what that meant. So, it began in earnest. I think it was probably December of last year. And we began this journey, this process of meeting regularly to follow this discernment process. Katie Harmon McLaughlin and David Brock are facilitators. And by the way, they're doing an excellent job. And we began to meet in person at the beginning. But now we're meeting regularly via zoom. So it's important in fact, from my perspective, I think it's going to turn out to be one of the most important actions of the council that I've been a part of, to engage in this discernment process for the Community of Christ. In my you know, whatever years I serve on it which would probably be about, you know, nine years or so. So I think it's it's critically important for the Council for the church and for us to as the smaller communities, of signal communities, whatever we, congregations, new expressions, to be able to discern God in our context is really important is fundamental to our discipleship.

Carla Long 13:09

It absolutely is. And, you know, even though you're talking about how you're doing just this, this kind of discernment since, however, long ago last December or something, I do want to say though, the World Church Leadership Council has been engaged in this kind of discernment for quite some time. I remember doing a podcast with Lach Mackay and Linda booth, and somebody else, and we talked about how President Veazey was chosen as the next President, Prophet of the church. And that was entering into a discernment time, even without naming it, I think, as a discernment time. So I think that it's critically important for the church to know that the World Church Leadership Council and leaders in the church are doing what they can to walk in step with God and putting away their own agendas. I think that is just so important for people to know, because some people think that we're not moving fast enough. Some people think that we're moving too fast. Some people think that, Oh, no, we should do things very differently. But we are as a people trying to do what God is calling us to do. I just really want people to hear that.

Dave Anderson 14:15

I think that's an excellent point, Carla, for the experiences I've had with world church leaders, from the very beginning. There's an intense desire to follow God's call, which is by definition, discernment. So excellent point well made, and I absolutely 150% like I always do, Carla, I agree with you.

Carla Long 14:38

Dave, always is a dangerous word with me. It's very dangerous.

Dave Anderson 14:45

And I want to make that point to your to the listeners. It's always Oh, wow,

Carla Long 14:51

You heard it here first, folks. Always! Dave always agrees with me. Um, so what does it look like? What is the search in the World Church Leadership Council look like? Do you all hold hands and pray together sing Kumbaya, I guess you don't hold hands and zoom very well. But what does it look like?

Dave Anderson 15:11

Well, it's steeped heavily in spiritual formation practices. Through the idea of the, you know, prayer of examine, for example, we've talked about the importance of meeting together through Lectio Divina, or dwelling in the word of a scripture, of reflecting through the practices of centering prayer, of reading the scriptures of gathering together in small groups, where we can share together the concerns that we have, but there is a specific definitive process that we're working through. And the first one is, you know, how are we invited to approach the process? The second one was, whose will are we discerning we? We want to remind ourselves that it's God, not our will. And then there's a various processes that we're kind of working. So without going into too much detail. I can share that with you if you'd like. But there is a definitive process where we're going through point by point and stages. So it's not just holding hands singing Kumbaya, which is a good thing, by the way. But it's a matter of following a process, but also being open to the spirit as it breathes through our community.

Carla Long 16:30

Yeah actually, I'd like to hear a little bit more about the process. You don't have to go into the minute details. But can you tell me a little bit about what that process even looks like? I'm really curious.

Dave Anderson 16:40

Okay, sure. Well, if I get down too much, just give me a, you know, give me, yeah, give me a thumbs down or whatever, then I'm getting too much into details. Because this is really exciting for me, I'm very process oriented. And anyway, this has been outlined by our facilitators, we all agreed to it. And so it's been a very good program, very good process. The first one was, as I mentioned, you know, what is the invitation for us to discern? What is the approach that we're invited to, to work together? We reaffirm the importance of spiritual freedom, reaffirm the idea of, you know, the will and the importance of discernment is following where God is and what God is doing. We also took time to review our great history, how has God been present with us through history, in both times of what we would call good times and bad times? And then we talked about framing the question, what is it that we were doing to discern, in this world church leadership council, when are regarded to you know, the idea of this metamorphosis? What does it mean? What's the question that we need to deal with? What's at the heart of the matter? And then we spend time talking about group spiritual freedom? What what restricts a free and open response to God? And what? what allows us? What do we what does it feel like to have this communal spiritual freedom? So we spent some time quite a bit of time talking about that? And then we spent time gathering data data? What sources of wisdom Shall we turn to? What voices Do we need to hear around the world? What systems and relationships will be impacted by our discernment? And then we spent some time framing the question and we came up with a question that hopefully, some of your listeners have already heard in other ways and venues. But early in the process, we developed a working discernment question, which is "God, where does your Holy Spirit lead us next, as we embody the soul of Community of Christ?" Now, given the nature of various opinions, views, etc. that was arrived at through good, healthy, robust discussion. And with that, we came up with a whole bunch of mutual understandings which we can go into later detail, but that's the central question. So we took that question, and then we gather data by going out to various people in our ministry context and asking them what their thoughts were. So members of the World Church Leadership Council, which represents worldwide leadership, went out and asked people question those questions, and or the, you know, what their thoughts were on that question or that discernment, emphasis. And then we gathered the data back, looked at what that meant, and then asked the question, what is emerging so far that we're invited to perfectly unintentionally live with, and then we're continuing in individual small group prayers and listening, and then eventually, as we proceed for, we're going to come to attend to decision? In other words, what's emerging out of this process? What are we feeling clear? And what is still unclear? Do we have an arriving consensus on a particular option? Is there a decision we are ready to move into? And then we'll spend another section of time another stage looking at seeking confirmation to that tentative decision? What is the confirmation of the Holy Spirit? And then eventually, we'll want to take action and reflect on the process of where we are, what our next faithful steps? How has this process deepened us as a community of leaders and being formed in the habit of discernment?

Carla Long 20:44

Wow, wow, I am super impressed. I'm really impressed I should have known there was gonna be, it was gonna be a lot. But it makes me feel better. Maybe this is the math major and me coming out. But it makes me feel better knowing that this is not just some hurly girly thing that you guys are just like jumping into, but there is an actual process that you're following. And that you can think about next steps, you can think about what step you're on. And I love the very first, I think is the second step, where it just sounds like you guys are getting out of your own way. Like you need to take yourself out of that. And or take your ego out, take your whatever out and then so you can so you can be completely open to listening to God. And I also, now I understand why the First Presidency contacted me and asked me a few questions.

Dave Anderson 21:38

Hmm,

Carla Long 21:39

hmm. So that that's good to know. Because I'm like, why? What is going on here, First Presidency? What's going on? So that was really, that's really interesting to know. And I wondered, Dave, so once you reach the end of this process, if there is an end of this process, and you don't feel like there's a clear path? Do you just do it again? What happens then?

Dave Anderson 22:09

Well, I excellent question. And again, we are learning as we go because this process, although we've practiced discernment as a community of faith, for probably since the beginning, we just didn't necessarily call it that we've always wanted to follow God's will. But this process of these stages, etc, are kind of new, in many ways of us going through a definitive process to arrive at what does this mean? You know, one of the really benefits of our the whole idea of spiritual freedom of setting aside our agenda is we're trying to follow what God's will is. And perhaps, and we've discussed this as a group, perhaps the only clarity we have is no clarity at all. But enough clarity to take one next faithful step at a time, acknowledging that God is with us as we go. There's a lot of scriptural context for that, for example, the the Exodus. They were wandering in the wilderness for, you know, a long time thinking that they were going to finally get to the promised land, and they were living in this area time, many authors called liminal space, that kind of place in between trying to figure that out in our leadership doesn't change because of that. So without getting in too much detail, we're trying to be open to God's desires. And maybe part of the freedom is to acknowledge and releases that we may not have total clarity. It's just enough clarity for one step at a time. But then also not disallowing, for full clarity. So we're still working through that.

Carla Long 23:56

That makes me really happy to hear. Because I think that we've always said and Community of Christ, it's really the journey and not the destination that we are a part of. And so I really love the idea that we just continue walking, and we continue on that journey. So I think I think that that is exactly in line with who we are. So my next question is, and I don't know if you have a full answer to this or not, but how has working in this discernment process, change the dynamics of the group or changed how the meeting meetings go when you get together with the world church leadership council? Are they

completely different? Are they pretty similar? or? Yeah, what's different and how has it changed you as a group?

Dave Anderson 24:47

Well, you know, it's a really good question and an important question, and I hesitate to speak on behalf of the group. In many ways. We'll have an opportunity as a group to talk about the Process later. But from my perspective, what this process of discernment is doing it is, is increasing our in our intensity, and strong desire for listening to God, in God's desires for the world, so we're becoming more and more kind of finely tuned to listening to God, and knowing in all humility, and knowing that we struggle with this idea of spiritual freedom, but to acknowledge that God is with us in this journey. So it's it's increasing the depth, I guess, of our, of our spirituality. And it's I think, in many ways, it's increasing an acknowledgement that the this gift of discernment we talked about, is a gift for all of our communities, and of the church, and for all Christians, to listen to the to the will of God. So it's, it's, it's a question and continuing to evolve, I guess, or an answered, to evolve into you know what that means. But I guess that's kind of trying to be a short answer at this moment of time.

Carla Long 26:24

Well, I don't think it was an easy question. So I appreciate the answer. I appreciate the honesty. How do you think this process has changed? You personally?

Dave Anderson 26:37

That's a really good question. Do you mind if I get a little preachy?

Carla Long 26:42

Dave, I love your sermons.

Dave Anderson 26:48

Excuse me? Well, this short answer the question of how discernment has changed me is profoundly my adventure with discernment began many, many, many years ago, when I had the opportunity to pursue further education and spiritual image missional formation, it continues in this world church leadership counseling experience, and also engaging with the spiritual formation and companion program. And by the way, I want to give a plug for that program. Excellent program. So hopefully, you've, you know, that said, it's a wonderful program, and hopefully, all the listeners out there will consider it in follow on cohorts, but fundamentally, discernment. And I, you know, it's practice it's discipline, it's trying to put my ego aside and spiritual freedom of listening to God and God's desires. For me, personally, it's helped remove a lot of anxiety about the outcomes of the church, because I try to shed my agenda for the congregation or for the church, I try to shed my desires and put God's agenda God's desires foremost in all my activities and decisions. I am released, of really the outcome, I try to align myself with God's purposes and mission. And my goal is to help the world creation flourish as an abundant life for all. So as a discerning person who wishes to see God's calling movement in the world through spiritual formation and deep listening, I tried to stop focusing on church centered questions. Instead, I explore what God centered questions would be what? So I asked myself, What is God calling me or us to do? How do we discern God's engagement in the community? I asked the question, what is God's desire here? And sometimes as I listen to the groups that I'm involved with, and sometimes if it falls into the

congregations, I think we are more concerned about what the church needs and its priorities rather than what God wants us to do. So church centered questions can quickly become more about programs, events, trips, or other activities that we are planning. And by wrongly asking these questions, we could believe that we can live out our discipleship by simply adding a charity into the schedule or even participating in a worship service. So falsely our activity becomes more about doing and acting and adding new programs, rather than doing or listening or being in hearing what God is calling us to do, and living our whole lives, in the context of God's presence and work in the world. And so it releases me when I acknowledge that I am allowing or I'm trying to follow God's desire. God is moving in the world. I need to listen to that. And the outcome will take care of itself because God is there. With the outcome, and blessing, the people the activities that are located so it releases me of all of the burdens of whether we're going to be, quote, successful. The, the my call is to discern God's will and to be a discerning person. So that's my sermon.

Carla Long 30:18

That takes an incredibly mature disciple, Dave, an incredibly mature disciple. I, I completely agree with you, I completely agree with you. But there is so much comfort in the doing, you know, there's so much comfort, it's like, oh, I'm doing something, I'm helping people. And there's so much unknown in the being. And God really does call us call us to be an Oh, it's just so hard. Dave, any, any advice for those people who are trying to maybe stop the business and doing and start the being?

Dave Anderson 30:56

Yeah, well, you know, it's a struggle, it's struggling my life, it's a struggle for all of us. And we kind of constantly have to constantly remind ourselves through our spiritual formation and spiritual practices, and through deep listening, that this is a journey that we're all taking in, it's easy to kind of slip back into doing and building rather than living into God's creation and living into the reign of God rather than, quote, building the reign of God. Now, I understand we use that term, and I'm okay with it. But to me, building is saying we're doing something, living into means that we're being and becoming into God's reign, because God's reigns already there.

Carla Long 31:43

Well, Dave, I am so appreciative of this podcast, I think this has been a really, really important podcast for people to listen to, and I appreciate you sharing what you've shared. And we're coming close to the end of the podcast, though, is there anything that you wanted to share that I didn't ask about? Or that you wanted to say?

Dave Anderson 31:59

Yeah, I do, I just I think it's important and we, as a world church leadership council have to remind ourselves that discernment is not decision making, or strategic planning. And I'd like to repeat that discernment is not decision making or strategic planning. Now, decision making is grounded in logical thinking and rational discourse. And there's nothing wrong with that. It assumes that we have the problem is, it assumes we have a capacity to understand and solve all of our own problems. And that this works best by maximizing our available resources and kind of maintaining order and control of the outcome. So group decision making gathers leaders to debate organizational outcomes, make kind of resolve differences negotiated outcome, and then make a decision acceptable for the whole. But

discernment is not the same, because discernment, as we talked about, adopts the stance of spiritual freedom. And so our only desire becomes the will of the Divine, as decided or discovered, not decided, but discovered by the group. It sets aside as we've talked about ego and politics, opinion and personal interests. Now, we also have to understand that reality is difficult sometimes to see the difference between them, and it kind of aligns blurred and sometimes we need to recognize the practicalities of leadership. And they require a mixture of the two between discernment and decision making, because of deadlines and the need of action. But what we need to recognize in all our capacities, we find ourselves regarding discernment is that discernment is so important in creating intentional space and time to listen to God in the midst of all this and that takes a concerted effort. Now, if you don't mind, I'd also like to just kind of give my closing thoughts of what discernment is, is a review of that, okay? So I'm going to kind of get a little preachy again here. So discernment, for me is deep listening, and simply hungering for God's life, to come more fully in you, Carla and me, in all of our listeners and our world. And so it's important to recognize that what happens when we do that, and to acknowledge that the results of our discernment in activities of living into the reign of God, all of the outcomes, all of the control, we are released from anxiety and worship, worry. And I believe strongly that God is really faithful and beyond our ability to imagine the workings of the Spirit, you know, We know go in and through and breathe into creation. And I really always go back to the blessings of our community and the blessings of the words of counsel that we have. And I believe to the marrow of my bones that when we practice discernment, which is opening ourselves to God, and God's agenda, God's desire and not our desires and building something that collectively and individually, God loves us with an everlasting love that delights in each of our faithful, discerning steps taken, moving us forward into this wonderful, unknown future, exciting yet daunting, mysterious, sometimes anxiety ridden, but if we follow this discerning process, opening up for ourselves to God, God will bless us and delights in each step taken.

Carla Long 36:01

Amen. Dave, amen! Amen. I really appreciate that a lot. I, I think that is so important for people to hear. I think it's important for me to hear. And I, I so appreciate you taking the time and sharing your knowledge with us and sharing your heart with us that that big giant heart that you have, thanks for sharing it with us today. And yeah, just Thanks a lot.

Dave Anderson 36:28

Well, it's a blessing to be with you, Carla, always good to see you and blessings to you and all of the listeners out there in their journey. And, again, I think it's important for us to discern God's agenda as we move forward into into her into her world.

Carla Long 36:43

Absolutely. Thanks, Dave.

Dave Anderson 36:45

Thank you, Carla.

Josh Mangelson 36:54

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