

**376 | Toward the Peaceful One | Michele McGrath**  
**Project Zion Podcast**

**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.

**Karin Peter 00:33**

Welcome to Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Karin Peter. And we're sharing a series of interviews with all the authors of the year long series of *Herald Magazine* articles exploring the guiding question, "Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One?" For those who are wondering what the *Herald Magazine* is, it's the official Community of Christ magazine publication that comes out every two months. You can find the *Herald Magazine* at [heraldhouse.org](http://heraldhouse.org) under the tab, "Our Faith". In today's episode we are visiting with Michelle McGrath. Michelle is a Community of Christ Bishop, who has served in a variety of roles in the church, including Financial Officer for Europe, and Eurasia, and as a member of the Presiding Bishopric. Michelle's a native of California. She received a Bachelor of Science in Accounting, and a Master of Arts in Christian Ministries from Community of Christ Seminary. So, hi, Michelle.

**Michele McGrath 01:37**

Hi, Karin, how are you?

**Karin Peter 01:38**

I'm good, and it's wonderful to have you with us today. Thank you for doing this interview with Project Zion Podcast.

**Michele McGrath 01:45**

Great to be back with Project Zion.

**Karin Peter 01:47**

So, your *Herald* article in "Toward the Peaceful One" series focuses on the environment and the part of *Doctrine and Covenants* 163:4b that reads, "The earth, lovingly created as an environment for life to flourish, shutters in distress..." So, as that with our preliminary thought there, Michelle, would you tell us a little bit why care for the earth, our environment, is important to you personally.

**Michele McGrath 02:22**

Yeah, I'd be happy to. There's so much packed into that little line from *Doctrine and Covenants* there. You know, I share a little bit in the article about my experience as a child growing up and, you know, getting to be in nature and getting to explore youth camping and the Community of Christ tradition, and the wonder of just being out in nature with nothing to do but look and smell and touch. And just how that sense of wonder and awe turned to gratitude when you think about the Creator who created this whole unique cosmos that's interconnected and provides so well for life and, as well as providing beauty for us. And then realizing, you know,

the environmental crisis that we're in right now, and thinking, one, this is the overarching issue, right? If we destroy the environment so it can no longer host life, a lot of our other issues won't matter because we won't have any place to live. And also thinking if this is God's creation, that God says many times, in different ways that God loves this creation that is created, it's created with love, that we sure haven't treated it very nicely, this incredible gift that God's given to us. And I think there's a real call for us to wake up, especially as people of faith, to wake up to this spiritual crisis that the environmental crisis is.

**Karin Peter** 04:02

So, you mentioned there that the interconnectedness of the environment and you write about that in your article, and you use the phrase, "That the earth flourishes when it's in right relationship." So, can you unpack that a little bit for us? What do you mean by that, that it flourishes when it's in right relationship?

**Michele McGrath** 04:25

Sure. You know, I use some of that language on purpose. When we think of words like "community" or "relationship", we definitely, usually think of that with other people, Being in community with other people, being in right relationship with other people. And those are important, those are important things. But the entire cosmos, the whole universe, the whole world can be seen as a community where life exists not by its own, nothing exists by itself, but all in relationship to one another. And the creation has a lot of natural rules that govern what its carrying capacity is and how well it can support life. And if one side of the equation gets out of balance, if one species gets too populous, or if one food source goes away, there will be natural correction to get back to a state of equilibrium, and that correction is not always, it can be destructive. And so, you know, when you think about the entire world as something that exists in right relationship, according to a whole set of natural rules and laws that keep it as a place that can support life and support flourishing, it can be one big giant community. And our call to be in right relationship with each other, I think, extends to a call to be in right relationship with God's creation as well.

**Karin Peter** 05:55

So, when we when we think about that, this relationship, and being a right relationship, the reality of our current situation is, we're *not* in right relationship with our environment, and we continue to have an impact on our environment. That's just the reality. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Michele McGrath** 06:13

Yeah, so when I was writing the article, I was thinking that, "The earth lovingly created..." and I wanted to stop there before I got to the bad part, and just think about that for a little bit. And just think about that before we got to, you know, where things have gone terribly wrong, and immerse a little bit in the wonder of the creation. And then realize, *wow!* We are really badly out of whack. We have really knowingly, and unknowingly, done some really terrible damage to the environment. And we may be at some tipping points here where we need to take some really significant corrective action. And so, I wanted to draw people into a conversation, not with a, you know, you're doing it wrong, kind of a judgmental tone, but to realize with awe and wonder what a gift it is. And then to realize that our misuse of the creation is a spiritual matter, is a

spiritual crisis, as well as just an environmental crisis that calls our attention. As people of faith, we should be in the forefront of leading in this movement. We haven't always. I say, "we", as like the big Christian tradition. The big religious traditions haven't, we haven't always been in the forefront. But I believe we're called to be, because I believe this is a spiritual matter for us.

**Karin Peter 07:43**

In Community of Christ, we have the Enduring Principle that says Sacredness of Creation, which makes it even more pointed for us. So, what does that mean? If it's out of balance, we participate in that, and yet we have this Enduring Principle?

**Michele McGrath 08:00**

Yeah, so we do have some, you know, we have the Enduring Principles of Sacredness of Creation and Responsible Choices as well.

**Karin Peter 08:09**

I don't like that one as much. So, I didn't bring it up.

**Michele McGrath 08:12**

That's usually looked at as the less fun one. I did a whole series of classes, you know, when the Enduring Principles were new, and I was teaching some reunions and some youth classes, and I would usually start by, you know, "Just yell out whatever Enduring Principles you can think of." And man, we never think of that one. [laughter] But I think it's the counterpart, you know, if something is sacred, then how do our actions, how do our choices reflect that? It's more than just saying, you know, "Yep, that's, creation. That's sacred all right", and then continuing to, you know, about our destructive ways. So, I wanted to invite people to think about where we are. I've forgotten what your original question was now, so.

**Karin Peter 08:59**

[laughter] We were talking about...

**Michele McGrath 09:02**

Tell me again. [laughter]

**Karin Peter 09:03**

We were talking about the current reality in which we live and here we have this Enduring Principle, Sacredness of Creation. So, what does that really say to us as a community?

**Michele McGrath 09:13**

Yes, thank you for getting me back on track. So, we have this Enduring Principle and that sensibility goes far back in our tradition. We have this concept of Zion and ourselves as co-creators of Zion, and Zion not being someplace far away in another heaven after we get rid of this planet, we're done with it, but here, you know, Zion is the kingdom of God in the here and now. And I don't think the kingdom of God would be a very wonderful place for us all to be if the environment is destroyed and we can't grow food and we can't breathe the air and there's no clean water. You know, Zion has to be a place where the environment is part of the whole Zion condition. So, I feel like that's a very clear call to us that as people who are creators

of Zion and people who believe in the Sacredness of Creation and Responsible Choices, that we have a very clear call, to inform ourselves, to open our eyes to be educated about it, to talk about it, to think about it, that this should be something we can talk about in a church setting. It's not separate from church. And we should, as always, do some introspection and see where we are part of the systems that are causing devastation. I will acknowledge that I am part of the systems that are causing environmental devastation. And then think what we can do individually. But even more important than that, what we can do communally, what we can do as a people to change the trajectory that we're on.

**Karin Peter 10:53**

So, you go a little further, even, in your article, and you talk a bit about the consumerism and our rampant consumption, and how that's got to be addressed if we're going to move towards Jesus the peaceful One. So, from your perspective, what does that look like for a faith community that seeks to follow Jesus?

**Michele McGrath 11:15**

Yeah, you know, one of the things I've seen often during Lent, which is really wonderful of time in the liturgical calendar to do some introspective work, and some repentance work, is to think about how we're living on the planet. And whether we're living well, whether we're taking more than our share, whether the things we own are owning us. And I think that consumerism is quite a rampant disease in the places of the world where I'm from and have lived. And I have bought into wanting more and more and better and bigger, and far more than I need, far more than I need to live. And so that value of living more simply on the planet, living more lightly on the planet, I think there's a lovely expression of you know, living simply so that others might simply live. I think those are spiritual disciplines for us, and ways for us to start to respond to the spiritual problem, that is consumerism. That is a heart problem and a soul problem of putting our trust in things and thinking, if I have all the stuff, then I will feel better. I'll be safe. You know, to think that that is the end and the goal of our lives, when, as people of faith, that's clearly not. But we live so often our day to day lives as if it is. We fall into that trap very easily.

**Karin Peter 12:51**

So, it's an uncomfortable place to be to begin to be introspective, as you encourage in your article and in our conversation, and to be repentant on behaviors. Nobody likes to have to go through a confession and repentance. It's not meant to be all that pleasurable, at least not in my experience. But that's actually what you're suggesting is, that we don't just give it kind of lip service. We actually go through a process of spiritual reflection and look at our own behavior practices. So, some listeners might be asking, So, what exactly can I do? What are some first steps? What are some practices I can put in place? What are some actions I can take?

**Michele McGrath 13:37**

Yeah, I try in the article, again, to call people back to the joy and the wonder of the creation and remember what it is that we're wanting to restore or protect. Jacques Cousteau has such a wonderful quote, and he says, "People protect what they love." So, I call them to remember. You know, let's remember our love for our home on this planet, the natural beauty that exists there. So, number one, you know, cultivate a connection with the created world, the natural world. And, you know, that might be, it might be a difficult time during COVID. People aren't going out

so much. However, it might be a great time. Maybe one of the few things we can do is, you know, take a walk somewhere in nature where we're not running into anybody else. So, if you live in a place where that's possible, what a blessing. So, maybe this is a good time to reconnect with nature, to rediscover kind of that love and that joy and that wonder and help the people around you see that too, you know, maybe plan your activities and events in a way that appreciate that. And then there are lots of ways and resources to start examining what your footprint is on the planet. So, if you're a person who has access to the internet and you're just going to google, you know, what's my carbon footprint, you'll find ways to calculate, you know, for example, how many Earths it would take to sustain your particular lifestyle. It's shocking to find out. You know, and then there are lots of ways to kind of assess, you know, better ways to make changes, you know, Can I eat differently? Can I buy differently? Can I clean my home differently? Can I use different products? And so, there are lots of ways to start to get educated. There's lots of good books to read. You know, there's just a lot of places to just inform yourself and to start thinking. I would also say, it's good to start talking to other people, to people that are your friends, people that are your, whoever you're talking to, at this point. If you're, you know, in touch with a congregation, a group of faith, friends via zoom, whatever it is, this is a topic for talking about too. Because ultimately, what we need to get to, beyond just our personal action, is our communal systemic change. Because I could, you know, go into the woods and live off the land. Maybe I could. Let's say I could. Let's say I could figure out how to live off the land and live very lightly and have next to no carbon footprint. However, there are these really big systems in our world, that make individual action not have as much impact as communal action. So, we need big community systemic action. So, if you engage, and you find a piece of the environmental puzzle that you particularly love, and have a passion for, so, if that's animal rights, or food justice or clean water, there are so many elements, I would say, what impacts your neighborhood? You know, is your neighborhood got a polluting factory nearby? Is your neighborhood struggling with clean water? Does your neighborhood struggle with, you know, with food insecurity? I don't know what it is. But start where you are, and figure out what's the piece of this that you can grab on to and start there.

**Karin Peter 17:16**

Thank you for that, for that good advice. I'm hoping our listeners are inspired to do that very thing. I'll be googling my own carbon footprint. Although I am sure I will be shocked at the results of that. Michelle, in the beginning of your article, you made a comment that I think will help readers get to know you a little bit. So, I just want to go back for a moment and visit that. You share that as you were growing up, songs were your first scripture. And throughout your article, you quote hymnody quite regularly. You share a lot of different lines from hymns and camp songs. So, do you have a favorite hymn that speaks to your heart in regard to this?

**Michele McGrath 18:03**

That's, it's such a hard question, right, your favorite hymn, because it's like asking, What's your favorite child? And on any given day, I might answer a different answer because I walk around with hymns in my head an awful lot. Today, the one I'm gonna choose is "Bless Be the Tie That Binds". This was my mom's favorite hymn. So, I cannot get through that hymn without crying now. But also, it speaks to the connection, the connectedness, and the blessings of connectedness. I'm gonna guess that the writers of the hymn, and most of the singers of the hymn think about our human connections. But when I think about the bonds we have with all the

creation, the trees that make the oxygen that I breathe, and the water systems that deliver clean, fresh water for me to drink and the way my food gets to my plate, I'm blessed. I'm blessed by all those many, many connections. And I want to do a better job of honoring them and protecting them and preserving them because I think we can show God that we love God back by loving the things that God loves and treating them well.

**Karin Peter 19:15**

Well, I won't look at that hymn the same. I had not thought of that particular him in this context. And I will from now on and I'm sure some of our listeners will as well. So, as we bring our conversation about your article to a close, I want to again, thank you for sharing with us. As a community, we explore and discern what it does mean to move towards Jesus, the peaceful One, especially through this lens of caring for the environment. So, before we sign off, do you have any kind of last comments or closing thoughts that you'd like to share with us?

**Michele McGrath 19:50**

You know, I'm really grateful at whoever came up with the idea of the guiding question, Are we moving toward Jesus the peaceful One? I mean, what a great guiding question. Anybody who wants to do some self-reflection, which should be all of us as disciples, what a great, simple and yet profound question. And I've so appreciated the other articles and the other podcasts on this topic. It's been really, really wonderful to engage in all the different aspects of what it means to follow Jesus in this way. So, I'm excited to be just a part of this awesome conversation. Thank you.

**Karin Peter 20:27**

As we're on the journey together. So, for our listeners, you can read all these "Toward the peaceful One" articles on the Community of Christ website at [cofchrist.org](http://cofchrist.org). In addition, theologian and former Dean of Community of Christ Seminary, Matt Frizzell, discusses each "Toward the peaceful One" article in a multi-part series on the Community of Christ YouTube channel. So, Michelle McGrath, again, thank you for being with us for our "Towards the peaceful One" episodes here at Project Zion Podcast. I'm Karen Peter, thanks so much for listening.

**Josh Mangelson 21:14**

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