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Project Zion Podcast

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

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Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long. And today you're listening to What's Brewing, a series where we talk about things that are happening all over the church that you may or may not know about. And this is really exciting and really fun today, because I bet you've heard about this. I'm here today with Leandro Palacios. Hello, Leandro.

**Leandro Palacios** 00:55

Hello, Carla. How you doing?

**Carla Long** 00:56

Good. It's so good to have you here. I'm really excited to hear about this because Leandro is the genius behind the Beyond the Walls Choir. If you've heard of the Beyond the Walls Choir, and I bet you have, you know that it's pretty awesome. And they've done just a phenomenal job of getting singers from all over the world. So, Leandro, I'm super excited about this podcast. But before we jump in, could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

**Leandro Palacios** 01:24

Well, first of all, I wouldn't say, genius. I would say, wizard. That's how people know me, as a wizard. So, yes, if you were asking about myself, and I'm Leandro. I am a member of the Toronto congregation in Canada. At the Toronto congregation, I guess that I have many hats. Before the pandemic, I was primarily dedicating my time to two things, the spiritual development as a meditation teacher, and other things that we read, as well as doing things like financial office and all the technical stuff that allows us to do our services online. And well, since the pandemic started, pretty much all that has switched to exclusively making the Beyond the Walls services possible. Especially all the technical part, just making sure that everyone, all the participants that connect remotely, are able to smoothly deliver and offer their ministry, as well as, of course, just putting together the choir. And I think we might hear a little bit more about that today.

**Carla Long** 02:47

Oh, we definitely will. You are so busy, Leandro. This is amazing. I didn't realize that you did all that before. And now, I mean, it's, the pandemic has really just changed everything. It's changed everything. So, yes, we definitely want to hear about the Beyond the Walls Choir. So, I mean, you can just tell us, like an umbrella view of the choir. So, tell us just a little bit about it.

**Leandro Palacios** 03:10

The Beyond the Walls Choir is, well, of course, a virtual choir. We cannot gather in-person. And it's quite challenging for those of you who have participated in in-person traditional choirs, this is a very different kind of experience. We have to, each one of us, record our voice singing over a reference track, and it takes a while to get used to that. You don't hear other singers. And also, you have to listen to your own voice recorded, which is pretty scary sometimes. But once we're over that initial obstacle of getting used to this new media, this new way of singing together, in a way, it's amazing how everyone gets really into it. And a lot of people start singing multiple parts and doing several takes and, until they like one or the other, which is something that we can't do in an in-person choir. In an in-person choir can only sing one line once. That's it. So, there's a little bit of, you know, there are some pros and some cons of this virtual choirs. But I think overall, it has allowed those of us who love to sing, who love to sing with other people, to somehow navigate through all the obstacles that the pandemic has presented for choirs in an unexpected way that is very meaningful, that is very, you know, entertaining. I think we all look forward to, you know, just to recording a new hymn, learning our parts, and, of course, listening to the final product every Sunday.

**Carla Long 05:08**

You know, you were talking a little bit earlier about sometimes people don't like what they hear or, like, what they hear is not what they think they sound like, you know, after they've done, sing it through. A friend of mine actually asked me to record for the Beyond the Walls Choir, and it was right after I had the baby. And so, right after I had my son, Ari, and I didn't have my breath back, you know, like, I still, I didn't have my full, and when I listened to myself, I'm like, oh, my gosh. That can't be how I sound. And I think now I sound better, because I have more breath back. But sometimes it's a little bit difficult to listen to yourself sing when you think you sound a certain way, and you actually sound another way. So, I'm really impressed by all the people who are singing and singing their hearts out and singing different parts. I think that's very cool.

**Leandro Palacios 05:54**

It is fantastic. And I am really surprised sometimes of also how, the more we start singing every week, the, just the better the choir sounds, just naturally without having, without myself having to do a lot of technical interventions after I receive the recordings. If I go back and listen to the first, but the first hymns that we were recording at the beginning of the pandemic, so that would be back in April 2020. We only had a handful of people. And we didn't have, like, a, what I would say, members, that is people who were singing regularly every Sunday, every week. And it's a very different sound quality. It's hard to believe how much the choir has evolved in just one year, which tells me that it is a real choir. I sing in Toronto. I've been singing for the last 10 years, if you count up 2020, with the Toronto Choral Society, which is a choir of 150 regular members. And it's non-audition, which means that there's people with very different musical talents, and yet, the choir, I think the reason that the choir sounds good is just that, year after year, we have the same singers, the same members. And that's a lot because you start not only learning all the quirks of your artistic director, but also you start learning other people, other people's voices, and you start singing together as a choir. And the quality is not the individual quality of each one's, each person's voice, each person's musical skills, but eventually is, the quality is collective, is the choir what matters. Doesn't it, like, at the beginning, we may have someone who is a Pavarotti or a Maria Callas, sometimes I say, and that doesn't mean that the choir is going to sound better. But

when we learn to sing together as a group, it's, that's when the choir starts sounding like a real choir, like the choir that you want to listen to.

**Carla Long 08:33**

So, it makes a lot of sense that you started off one way and now you are a different way. That makes a lot of sense to me, like, just like a regular "real choir" because you are a real choir. So, my next question. How do you find people to be in this choir? Or if someone who's listening wants to be a part of your choir, can they be a part of it too?

**Leandro Palacios 08:56**

When we started this, I have to go back to sometime in 2017, when we started with the Beyond the Walls services on Thursday evenings, once a month. And we invited, back then, people who were following our Facebook page and our social media in general, who like to sing, to join their voices to sing one or two hymns that we were putting together with, not only with audio, but also with video back then. And that's where the first long term members of the choir came in. There's a few people who have been singing with us since then, since 2017. Now, back then, I wouldn't call that a choir. It was more like congregational singing. It was just a handful of people. Sometimes we had four, sometimes five. On a good month we would have a congregation of 10 singing. But it was, it was different. It was like the idea originally was, it had to sound like a congregation singing, so that when you are experiencing the service, you really get into the mindset of, that the hymn is intended to help you get into. Something like that. Now, when we, at the beginning of the pandemic, all of a sudden, we went from having, say, up to 100 live participants on a Sunday service, to just, in one week, we had, like, 400. That was a, that was a surprise. And a lot of people were asking, we would like to sing. We hear this, these hymns, and you know, there's just nobody singing, or maybe I'm singing alone, and it's not the same. And so, I said, you want to sing? Alright, let's create a choir. And so, it started like that, just because on that first service of the pandemic, I think it was March 15, 2020, a lot of people told me, we need a choir. We need to sing. And, sure, I accepted the challenges, the challenge, and here we are. And so, what we do now is, once it got started, it took a while. It took a while until we reached a number of singers that was enough to start singing in parts and to do more interesting things. You know, we, at the beginning, as I said, we probably had 10 singers at the beginning of the pandemic. Now we have, out of 60 people that might sing regularly, I think at least 40 people sing every Sunday. And so, that's different. That's already a good number for singing in parts, for just having a rich sound of a choir. And we are constantly inviting everyone. The choir is non-audition. Anyone can sing. You don't have to be a member to sing. You don't have to be a musician, a professional singer. So, this is a choir. There's, it's, that means it's a diverse group. There's people with very different musical talent. People who are probably having a bad day with struggling with their breathing, people who just might not be very good singers at all, but they just like to sing, like when you go to church on Sunday, you sing a hymn. And so, it really, everyone is invited to sing. I know it's more work for me when there's a lot of singers, but I've just, it just fills my heart to, when we get new singers. That said, we often, at this point, we might get a new singer, once or twice a month. The choir has reached a very stable, just group. It's, so, that amazes me. And it's part of the reason that it's a little bit easier for me. I already know the voices of everyone. If I have 20 tracks sounding at the same time, and someone is saying the wrong word, I know, at this point, I know who that person is. And I can just go and fix it right away. So that, that's an advantage. But also, it just fills me with joy when someone contacts me to say, "So I would like to sing with you guys, but...". And, but,

nothing. I just, "Yes!" I just love those emails, those Facebook messages. So please, if you, listening to this podcast were considering that you might want to give it a try, but you're afraid that, "I'm probably not good enough. I don't know if I know how to record. I don't know." Or, "Maybe I don't have the technical skills to do it right." Don't worry. Just talk to me. I want to talk to you because it just makes me so happy. This is something that makes me very happy. So please, I am hoping that you will add to my happiness and sing with us.

**Carla Long** 15:11

Leandro, that is so sweet. That is such a kind offer. So, the best way to get ahold of you is maybe just through Facebook Messenger and just type in Leandro Palacios and they'll find you? And that's the best way? Okay, cool.

**Leandro Palacios** 15:23

If we, yeah, if we are, if you use Facebook, I'm on Facebook. Just send me a private message. You can also send a message to the Toronto congregation page. You can send me an email [info@centreplace.ca](mailto:info@centreplace.ca). Just remember, you have to type it the Canadian way. Center is like C-E-N-T-R-E, okay?

**Carla Long** 15:54

That's right. Sometimes it's hard for Americans, like me, to remember that, for sure. So, thank you for being very specific with that. So, Leandro, I have to tell you, you called yourself a wizard, or maybe other people called you wizard and I agree.

**Leandro Palacios** 16:06

I've been called a wizard.

**Carla Long** 16:08

...a technical wizard, because my husband and I really wanted to do what you do, right? And we got like, just, I think six singers total. And we tried to put them together and make it sound good. And it, it was really hard. Like, it took us a long, long, long time to make the voices sound together. And I think that you are a wizard. Without going too much into the technical stuff, can you just give us a little overview of how you do that? Like, how do you get all those voices to come together?

**Leandro Palacios** 16:40

There's quite a few steps. And so, to try to make a very long story short, I would say that the first thing that you have to do is decide what you want to do. Sometimes, when people approach me, to ask me for tips on how to do this, or how to put a choir together, they really don't have a clear idea of what, how they want that to sound. So, first of all, you know, you have to, ideally, you're going to have your own pianist or organist who is going to play the music track for you, so that you don't, you don't have any kind of issues with permission, copyright, that kind of thing. So, just how you, play it yourself or your congregation organist can, or you know, a guitar player can play the reference instrumental part. That is very important, because you have to give people that track so that everyone sings along that same file. Something that happened to us, at the very beginning, is that people were singing with the Herald House recordings of the hymns. And then, I cannot use those because we don't use those. And so,

they were singing at a different tempo. So, in order to stay together, make sure that everyone sings along the same file. So, that's one thing. And then if, for recording is very simple. I just tell everyone, just record with your phone. You don't need to have any kind of fancy audio equipment or use some microphone or anything complicated. The phones, the smartphones are pretty good at recording our voice. So, that's what I always recommend. Then, I receive those files and then, the fun part starts. I do love audio editing software. I've been using that for, I don't know, more than 20 years. And so, there's plenty of options. There's the, some free options, like the podcasters use a lot, Audacity. That is, it's a fairly solid, free and safe software that you can use to put all the voices together. You have to spend a little bit of time synchronizing, and that might take some time. And then, that's when the fun starts. That's what I was saying about, what do you want your choir to sound like? And, you know, the sky is the limit there because you can spend some time, let's say, one hour synchronizes the voices, and just, yeah, go on stage, or you can spend a whole week. That's up to you. So, that said, the more you do it, the more you develop your skills to make it faster. And so, that's what allows me to put together one or two hymns every week, even if I sometimes receive, like, this last week that we sang "Amazing Grace", I had almost 70 recordings to synchronize, not counting the soloist, and the back vibe and all that. So, that's a separate work. But it's, the more you do it, that the first time you do it, it's going to be frustrating. It's not going to sound like you want. It's going to take you a long time. But the more you do it, is it just like everything. It just becomes second nature and it's going to go faster, and your results are going to be much better. It requires patience.

**Carla Long 20:58**

Oh, patience, I was never dealt that card so, I have a hard time with that one. Leandro, you are a technical wizard. That's amazing. 70 voices, 70. That's incredible. I'm very, very impressed with your skill and your talent. Very impressed. And I'm so glad that you had a pandemic to hone those skills. How lucky?

**Leandro Palacios 21:21**

Well, yes, it's, it is amazing. Like, we have to adapt. We, you know, we knew, we didn't know, first of all, how long we were going to be able to do this for. And I, it, although it's been painful and difficult, that this pandemic has lasted so long, and especially here in Canada, we're nowhere close to the end. You guys are doing much better there in the US. But, yeah, in a way it has allowed, it has given us time to develop this in something that I am confident to say will continue. This is not something that will end with the COVID lockdowns. Many singers are already asking about that. Will the choir continue when we go back to our congregation churches for in person service? Yes, for sure. The Beyond the Walls Chorus, as it was at the beginning, started years before the pandemic and it will continue. And I don't know if we'll have a chance to record all the corpus of the *Community of Christ Sings*. But we'll try.

**Carla Long 22:41**

Well, I'm so glad that you mentioned that because we, in the Salt Lake congregation, at least, we use the Beyond the Walls Choir, weekly, if not, monthly, if not weekly, like we use it very often. And I am always grateful when I have a song in my head, and I go and I find it, and you have already sang it. Because it is so, so much better to sing with people than just to sing with the piano or whatever. So, if people don't know how to access all of your amazing hymns that you've already done so far, can you tell us how they can access that, in case they want to use it for their congregations?

**Leandro Palacios 23:16**

We have a YouTube channel, and the URL is very long so, I'm not gonna say it here, but you can just go to our website. Our website is [www.centreplace.ca](http://www.centreplace.ca). And that doesn't matter how you spell it. If you spell it the wrong or the right way, it will go to the website: [centreplace.ca](http://www.centreplace.ca). And we have simplified the website. And we have updated it for the reality that we're in right now. So, if you go to the website, the first thing you see is the upcoming Sunday service, and right underneath, you have three buttons, one for watching the worship services, one for listening to the choir and then the other one, what's the other one? I should know this. Oh, and the other one is the lectures. We haven't done lectures in a while. That's why I don't even remember. But, yeah, you have one of the buttons that you will see on our website is the link to our music library. And we, of course, give everyone permission. Not just that we give permission, we feel blessed every time someone shares our works with their congregations, on their Zoom services or their in-person services, and in case they want to use that instead of just a piano track. So, it, of course, it really, for myself, but also for all the singers, to know that our voices are really being heard around the world by Community of Christ congregations and also by congregations of other denominations. It's a real blessing. So, yes, please go ahead.

**Carla Long 25:19**

It's been a super big blessing. And I'm so glad you said, "Yes, go ahead," because my next question was, it's okay with you and the Beyond the Walls Choir that we listen to you during our services, right? And it sounds like it's not only okay, but it is encouraged. I hope that's true.

**Leandro Palacios 25:36**

You know, it's funny, it's, of course, it's okay. But yeah, I do get a lot of requests about it. Some people, I guess, are concerned about, you know, just making sure that we're okay with that. Of course, we are. So, go ahead and use them. But there's other people that just go ahead. And it happened that a couple congregations I saw, because I follow a lot of congregations on Facebook and YouTube, they somehow managed to use our songs before we even published them. So, I don't know how they did it. But, yeah, let's make, if you're going to use our music, just make sure you use the right kind of recording. Because on our YouTube channel, we also have the reference tracks that we use for recording. And so, some people have emailed me saying, "There's all these distracting metronome and clapping and they're, in the hands. Can you just get rid of that?" So, if that's what's happening, you're picking the wrong recording. Okay, so, just so you know, if I start saying, "123 clap", that's for the singers. That's not for listening.

**Carla Long 26:52**

Oh, that's actually very helpful. I did not realize that because one time I did hear that. And I was like, huh, this is an interesting way to sing this song. So, now we know. This is, this is such great information, Leandro. And I did want to say, I usually use the YouTube link. I go to YouTube and just type in "Beyond the Walls", and you guys come up at the very top, and then there's tons of songs, and it's always so good. It's so good. Okay, another question. If people are super into this, and they want to be the next technical wizard of their area, is there a way that they can learn more about this, like, from you or from somebody else? Learn about how to do this or something?

**Leandro Palacios 27:31**

I really would love to encourage anyone who thinks they have the technical skills, and the enthusiasm, and the patience to put a virtual choir together. I really would encourage you to just go ahead and do it. And, in fact, with the Canada East Mission, we are putting together a workshop. It's called Virtual Choir Director Workshop. And this is going to be a four-week workshop. So, we're going to get together the first week, and we're going to introduce like, some technical details about how this works. And then we're going to start working. So, this is going to be just a hands-on. You will have a chance to end these four weeks with something, with your own virtual choir. So that's what we're hoping for. And we're going to use software that anyone can access for free. So, you don't have to worry about that. The only thing that you need, if you wish to join, is, what, I'm not sure how that the workshop has yet been published on the Community of Christ in Canada website, but we will soon. And we will also announce it on Beyond the Walls. So, you'll, just don't worry. You'll hear about the workshop on social media. But I'm really hoping that it is going to be very informative, and not only for people who will be participating actively, but also for anyone who is just curious about how this whole thing works. You can just assist the workshop without having to do, a, without having to put together your own choir. So, both kinds of participants are welcome.

**Carla Long 29:37**

That is so cool that you're willing to share what you've learned over the past year with other people who might want to do that. Leandro, that's very kind. And I really appreciate you doing even more work to teach other people how to do it. It's very cool. So, if they want to learn more about the activity, the four-week activity, they should follow Beyond the Walls on Facebook, if they can, and you guys will post it on there, I'm assuming? Is that the best way to do it?

**Leandro Palacios 30:02**

We will post it. Yeah, we will announce it on the Sunday service, and we will also publish it on the Canadian Church website. That's a little bit long. But if you remember it, or if you have a, if you have a chance to write it right now it's, Community of Christ, that's the Canadian church website, and it will be posted there.

**Carla Long 30:30**

Perfect.

**Leandro Palacios 30:030**

But, you know, this thing that you say, Carla, about additional work, it's actually something that those of you who are considering putting together your own virtual choir should know, that there's a little bit of a trade-off. And this is something that I will explain at length in the workshop and is, sometimes more work ends up being less work at the end. So, and also, that I feel that in this community, the more people learn how to build their, just put together their music, that they love, their virtual choirs, even if you do it for one or two hymns, doesn't matter. But the more we can all start coming together to do these, this music together, I think we will just collectively build a CCS library of hymns, that is very, that many, many people have requested. Many people are waiting for that. I know that there's out there, a, Glen Johnson, from the Lamoni Heartland Mission Center, has built a spreadsheet with all the different congregations who have sung different hymns. So, there's a lot more hymns, not just the Beyond the

Walls Choir. And really, realistically, the Beyond the Walls Choir doesn't have the capacity to record everything right away. So, we've, right now, we're only recording one hymn every week. Sometimes we do two hymns per week. But you know, there's 665 hymns in *Community of Christ Sings*. And there's also, there's a gray hymnal, the red hymnal. There's a lot of great music out there that, it's part of our tradition, the Restoration, that RLDS tradition, and even the larger Christian tradition, that we would love to be able to sing along to on our Zoom meetings, and even when we go back to having service in-person. So, that would be wonderful. And we need your help. So, if you're considering it, just give it a try, the workshop. It'll be in the summer for the Canadian e-camping.

**Carla Long** 33:10

It's very cool, Leandro. It's very cool. Well, I've just been so grateful for all the information that you've given here today. I, you've, I've learned so much, actually. I've learned a lot. So, I really, I'm really grateful for your expertise and grateful that you're willing to share it. Is there anything else that you wanted to say that I didn't ask or something else that you thought we, people should definitely know?

**Leandro Palacios** 33:34

You know, once again, I think I mentioned this, but just once again, just encourage those of you who love to sing, to just do it. Just give it a try. Don't worry. I know that sounds like, Carla, you were saying, you know, when you listen to your voice for the first time in a recording, it doesn't sound like the way you thought you sound when you sing, and usually is, it sounds worse than you thought. And guess what? That's true for everyone. We hear our own voices in it differently. But the good news is that, for better or worse, everyone else is already used to your voice. So, that should be, you know, I don't know if that encourages you to sing. But regardless, the only human being, other than you, who will listen to your solo singing, is me. And believe me, I don't have time to, just to, think too much about your musical abilities. If you follow my instructions that I give in the, I send very, very detailed instructions on how to sing. If you follow those instruction, I'll be more than happy to have you sing with the Beyond the Walls choir. So, please do, if you're considering it.

**Carla Long** 35:00

Oh, that's wonderful to hear. Actually, I feel very encouraged, actually, to do that. So, thank you so much, Leandro. It's been a pleasure to talk to you today. I really appreciate you taking the time to do that for me.

**Leandro Palacios** 35:13

Thank you, Carla. And, now that you mentioned that, I'll be waiting. I've been looking forward to receiving your recordings, maybe next week. But this week, if you want, we have a beautiful hymn this week to record, so.

**Carla Long** 35:26

Oh, I know. I'm sure you do. I'm already sweating, Leandro. I'm already sweating a little bit. I mean, I feel like I should tell you and the listeners, I'm not a terrible singer. I did try out for Australian Idol when I lived in Australia, and I made it through the first round. I still feel pretty good about that.



**Leandro Palacios** 35:43

Wow! Okay, now, now, I'll be sad if you don't sing with us. So, yes, please do, Carla.

**Carla Long** 35:52

Okay. Well, thanks again, Leandro. You're wonderful. Thank you.

**Leandro Palacios** 35:56

Thank you, Carla. Great talking to you.

**Josh Mangelson** 36:05

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