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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.

Carla Long 00:33

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long. And today I am extra, super excited to be with two wonderful guests to talk more about evangelist blessings. I'm here with Jane Gardner and with David Brock, two very dear friends to me, and I just love talking to them, 'cause I always, always, always, always learn something when I talk to them, which is always good for me. So, I'm gonna let them introduce themselves. Jane, why don't you go first? Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Jane Gardner 01:02

Sure, um, since 2016, I've been the Presiding Evangelist for our denomination, and followed Dave in that role. Prior to that I was President of the High Priest Quorum for nine years, and very active in the worship life of the church. So, that's been my focus of most of my writing. And the things that I've produced have been in the worship area, or the sacraments, very near and dear to my heart.

Carla Long 01:36

I can't believe you've been the Presiding Evangelist for five years. I can't decide if the last five years has gone super-duper fast with this pandemic in the middle of it, or super-duper slow. I can't decide. It's been both. Dave, what about you? Tell us a little about yourself?

David Brock 01:52

Well, the most important thing right now is that I've been a grandfather for two months and that's all I need to say. But I will say just a bit more. I retired after almost 40 years of work for the church, in 2016, I believe so, almost, well, you do the math, almost five years. And I worked for the church primarily internationally, most of, most of my years in Africa and Latin America, in the Pacific, as well as places in the US and Canada even. So, that was one of the great gifts of my time of work in the church. I currently live in Redmond, Oregon, central Oregon, in the US, and here with my wife, Carolyn. And our daughter, Emily, and her husband, and our grandson live in California. I, as June, as Jane, sorry, Jane, as Jane said, I was Presiding Evangelist before she was, from 2007 to 2016. No, yes, that's correct. So that's a little bit about me.

Carla Long 03:09

And I, Dave and I have done a different podcast together. And I would be remiss if I didn't say Dave was the person who called me into priesthood, in 2003, in Australia. So, Dave and I do have that connection. So, I just love thinking about that. So, let's start, kind of, base level here. Can we just do a little bit of an overview about evangelist blessing? Just tell us what that is, and all that stuff.

Jane Gardner 03:36

So, I'd be happy to. I think it's important to think of it in the context of the eight sacraments of the church. And so, people are probably pretty aware of what those eight are, evangelist blessing

being one of those. I think it's important from the standpoint of a basic foundation for our sacraments, tie back to ministry moments in the life of Jesus in the Gospels. And so, for all eight sacraments, we can tie to moments in Jesus's ministry where it was very sacramental and provided an example or a pattern for us. For evangelist blessing, we often point both to the Old Testament, which was very heavy with patriarchal blessings, father to son, but also in the New Testament, where Jesus, in John chapter 17, really beautifully blesses his disciples before he leaves, and the words of that blessing become very strong. We also point to a couple of other scriptural moments, one of which would be the Beatitudes, where Jesus is teaching about who is blessed and what that means. And then finally, the very last moment of Jesus's ministry, as it was recorded in Luke, the 24th chapter, talks about Jesus taking his disciples out on the hill, and raising his hands and blessing them before he ascends or as he ascends. So, those are three, kind of, foundational places where we get a pattern for blessing. In our denomination, obviously, what I've just said, shows a little bit of evolution. So, we've moved from patriarchal blessings, to evangelist blessing. And I think part of that, or most of it, might have been gender related, as women were called into the priesthood, but not all of it. I think that that father son pattern from the Old Testament, is an important foundation, but it's not the only, it's not just in family relationships, that we find these blessings. So, I think it's important to think a little bit broader about those. So, for the evangelist blessing, they're open to anyone. And I mean, anyone who wants to contact an evangelist. That would be someone who holds the office of evangelist within Community of Christ. And what most evangelists will do is begin sessions, or a type of preparation, with the person requesting a blessing or persons requesting a blessing. And I'll talk about that in a little bit. But we're very dedicated within the Order of Evangelists to this preparing for the sacrament. And in my experience, Carla, that preparation, in one case that I can think of, was like a six-month period, where I met with the person, like, once every other week. Another one was a whole year, where we met continuously around, you know, prep, preparing for the sacrament. And, lest it sounds like this is, kind of, from the top down, it really, what I have experienced with the evangelists and hope that I am able to convey in my own ministry is this "walking with" idea, that evangelists walk with people who are requesting the sacrament, and that walking with is a part of the preparation, getting to know each other, building a relationship. And at the same time, kind of, wisely moving into deeper spiritual practices with people so that when the time for the sacrament comes, they've, they are prepared, that they've been in touch with God. They've been watching for God, listening for God, all very important parts of the preparation. And then we make an appointment for a particular date and time, usually in some kind of worshipful setting, and we meet together. We might have some conversation, some scripture. I always include song, it just is who I am, and then move into the prayer part of the sacrament. So, for us, in our denomination, this is a prayer that's recorded, and most often these days, I see them recorded on iPhones, so it's a wonderful evolution there. And we record them for a couple purposes. One is, we want to put the words of the blessing in print, so that the people who receive the blessing can refer back to it and read it often. That becomes really, really important. And the other reason is that evangelists then are charged with sending in any blessings they give to headquarters where we keep an archive. So, if you ever get the chance to look at the archive, there's some gorgeous leather-bound books that are, I don't know, they're probably 11 x 14, and very parchment style paper, and we're talking back to the 1800s in terms of some very early blessings that are recorded. So, it's fascinating and there is an archive. So, my office, under the wonderful assistance of Katie Toese can receive requests from people who've lost their blessing, or can't remember where, what was said, for whatever reason, they want a new copy. And so, the archive is there for that purpose. And we also, the Presidency, on occasion, has given researchers permission to research through the archive for certain reasons. So, all of that points to why we, why we build that archive. So, for me, those are, kind of, the main things that we prepare with the people who want the blessing. We set a time and offer a sacramental prayer. We record the prayer,

and we make sure that they have a copy of it. And then the fourth aspect of that is one that can often get overlooked, but it is a continuing relationship between the evangelist and the people receiving the blessing. So, you know, just checking in to see how are you doing since we met and had the blessing? How's it feeling to you? Where are you headed? And just, kind of, keeping in contact with people with whom we've had this wonderful relationship, moving into the sacrament. We want to, kind of, keep that active after the sacrament piece of that is finished. So, those are, kind of the four criteria that we have. And the only other thing I'll stick in here real quick is that we have evolved to the point where we talk about continuing life blessings. That means that what, whoever or whatever entity has had an evangelist blessing, so if it's a family, or a couple, or a congregation, or a person, at some point in their future, they can request another evangelist blessing. So, that becomes their continuing life blessing. And that is true of all of the different aspects of evangelist blessing, that if someone feels the need, or it would be helpful to them, they can request a continuing life blessing as well.

Carla Long 12:18

Thanks, Jane, that's really helpful for a lot of people who might not be well versed in the process. And also, you said the word "archives", and I know that there are some people on here salivating at the word archives, that they can't, couldn't wait to get their hands on those. There's a lot of people on here really love digging through archives. I am not one of them. So, that's the past. I want to talk a little bit about looking forward. What are some of the more recent developments in evangelist blessings? And sometimes that feels a little bit like a juxtaposition, recent developments and evangelist blessings, but I know that both Dave and you have done so much work to really bring evangelist blessings into the future, and to make them really relevant. So, what are some of the most recent developments?

Jane Gardner 13:04

Yeah, I think, um, just, in light of what I said earlier, I think all eight sacraments evolve. I don't think they're frozen in a moment in time. And things just keep moving. So, most recently, for the Order of Evangelists, *Doctrine and Covenants* 165:5 is addressed to the Order of Evangelists, and it talks about being able to offer the evangelist blessing, not only to individuals, but also to couples, and to families and households, and groups and congregations, so, any of those entities. So, that's kind of new. Evangelist blessings have been around a while for congregations. So, I don't know, Dave, would that be 1980s when congregational blessings occurred?

David Brock 14:08

Yeah, might have been the early '90s. But yeah, you're pretty close there.

Jane Gardner 14:13

Somewhere in there. Yeah. So, we've been having congregational blessings for a while. But this section of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, which was added, I think in 2019, wasn't it? I don't find a date on it. Oh, no, this is, words of counsel were in 2013, and then it went into the *Doctrine and Covenants* in 2016. So, okay. But these words then, kind of, opened up the platform for evangelist blessing. So, both Dave and Steve Veazey and I, as this was evolving, spent some days in retreat, really prayerfully considering, what does this mean? And what does this mean about the sacrament? And most of it, I think, is pretty self-explanatory. The words that are chosen in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, in terms of blessings for individuals and congregations, families and households, was interesting. The discussion we had kind of focused on how do you define a family? How do you define a household? And in the end of our discussions and our prayerful consideration, we just decided that wasn't ours to define, that if someone declared themselves a family, they were a family. And if they declared themselves a household, they

were household. So that could be like, a grandma and grandchildren, it could be brothers and sisters, just whatever was their definition of family or household. And then the one we got a little bit legalistic about, not too much, but we just felt it needed a definition, was the word groups, so, offering evangelist blessing to groups. And what Dave and Steve and I came up with, was that these are groups of disciples and seekers and friends, who meet for a specific purpose related to Christ's mission and share an expectation to be in relationship as they work toward that goal, whatever their goal is. So, some examples of groups that arise out of that definition for me are, we've given evangelist blessings for AA groups, for Alcoholics Anonymous. We've had evangelist blessings for a Boy Scout troop or a Girl Scout troop. We've done evangelist blessings for a camp board, so, those folks who were elected to serve for a particular mission center or area on a camp board. So, that just gives you some ideas of groups. We've had evangelist blessings on people who were in a particular focused relationship, whether it was they were in the same class together at college, and they wanted to be blessed before they went out into the world, whatever that is. So, it's a pretty broad definition. But it isn't just any group and I think the definition helps with that a little bit, and that definition is in the guidelines that Dave and Steve and I developed for the evangelists so they could understand what was being said there.

Carla Long 17:58

That was really helpful. Dave, did you want to say anything about that?

David Brock 18:03

No, I'm good for right now. Jane's doing a wonderful job.

Carla Long 18:05

Okay, I thought I...Jane is doing a wonderful job. So, Jane, last October, the church put out a document, and let me make sure I get this right. The document was called "Sharing the Sacraments in Community of Christ, When In-Person Contact is Not Possible." And so, this has really changed a lot in the way we offer sacraments. A lot! So, can we talk a little bit about the evangelist blessing, and maybe how it's changed, you know, being offered online and things like that?

Jane Gardner 18:43

Sure. And Dave, you jump in there, if you want to talk about it. These are basically guidelines developed by the Presidency for all priesthood, for all eight sacraments, talking about what the pandemic meant in our world, and how they impacted the sacraments. And essentially, I'll just, you know, talk about evangelist blessing here, but of course, all the sacraments were impacted. For evangelist blessing, it pretty much boiled down to offering some words that would help people imagine hands of blessing, because one of the symbols of evangelist blessing is that idea of placing our hands on someone's head, or having our hands uplifted, like Jesus did in the 24th chapter of Luke. So, thinking about hands being important, the Presidency, in these guidelines, wanted us to put words so that we would, in some way, have the, what we needed to be able to imagine, what it meant for the sense of touch. So, I can read from the document, as an evangelist, I'm supposed to say something like, "May you accept God's invitation into the sacredness of this moment, as you allow yourself to imagine and sense the touch of my, or our hands on your head." So, that's primarily the impact for evangelists, other than the obvious impact of not being able to be in the same location. So, that gave us some freedom from not having to be in the same room with the person, which is true of, you know, most of the sacraments.

Carla Long 20:45

That is really helpful. I that's, that's very helpful. I mean, just the idea. I work in Utah, as many people who listen know, and just the idea that we can offer any sacrament online. I've done, of course, I haven't done evangelist blessing, but I have done an administration, laying on of hands. I, of course, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and just the joy that can be offered, that, just the joy that is followed being offered those. It's just been palpable. It's been so wonderful. So, I'm really grateful to the church for stepping out in faith and doing that. So, I'm grateful, grateful to the evangelist for finding all of these new ways to do this. So, do you have any stories that you want to tell us about the online evangelism?

Jane Gardner 21:33

Yeah, actually, there's a couple. One was occurring just as we went into isolation, and it's a very interesting situation. It would not, it is not specific to the pandemic, but it is a situation where the person requesting the blessing was actually incarcerated and had been working with an evangelist for a blessing. He was incarcerated, and through correspondence, because they couldn't talk over the phone, the prison system did not allow that. So, they did everything with letter writing. And they continued after the incarceration, with the preparation for the blessing. When it came time, and they both thought they were ready for the blessing to occur, the prison staff said, "We're sorry, you just, we can't allow you in there. We don't allow phone calls in this way." So, the only phone call the gentleman was allowed was to his parents. And so, what they ended up, I mean, they called and talked to my office and asked, "You know, will this be all right?" But what they ended up doing was, the evangelist wrote down the evangelist blessing that was specifically meant for this person who was incarcerated, and sent that written down blessing to the parents. And then the parents phoned the young man, and read it to him over the phone. So, I mean, talk about adapting, right? Because we can't be in the same room. The other one is a little more humorous. I had a call from an evangelist who was working with someone before isolation to get ready for an evangelist blessing. And when the isolation hit, the person who had requested the blessing really wanted to go ahead with it, just really did not want to wait until after the pandemic. And so, we tried all kinds of problem solving, and how could this happen? And what they ended up with is the, the gentleman who requested the evangelist blessing sat in his dining room, in a chair, near the window. And the evangelist was outside looking in that window, and they were talking over the cell phone, right? So, and she gave the blessing in that way, where they could see each other through the window and participate. So that's just a couple of things. Where we can't be together, obviously, the optimal thing is to be together in relationship and, but it just can't always happen. And so, I'm thankful that we have ways of addressing that.

Carla Long 24:29

I am so grateful for creativity. I think that creativity during this pandemic is, has probably been, been, has probably been the most underrated thing, because we have to be creative in order for ministry to happen. I did see some memes about, like, using a squirt gun for baptisms. I did not go there but there was, there was those things of course. So, since I loved hearing those stories, Jane, and I know that Dave is also a good storyteller, and I know that he has some good stories to tell as well. So, Dave, I'm kind of just going to turn it over to you to talk a little bit about some stories from your time as an evangelist or pre-evangelist.

David Brock 25:10

Yeah, thank you, Carla. And thanks, Jane. And I just, you both said it well, but I would just reiterate how the creativity and prophetic witness, I would say, that's been expressed through the sacraments, particularly over this last year, in just such beautiful ways. I, you know, I, I'm a

real believer, as Jane is, in the sacraments, the power of the sacraments, the sacredness of the sacraments. And I've been with some people in other denominations who, because of similar perspectives, had, didn't have an opportunity, because their denomination didn't, wasn't, well, I'm being judgmental, but wasn't flexible enough to find ways to serve communion, to bless the sick, to bless children, etc. So, I'm, I'm pretty proud of us, or thankful for the ways we've been able to express the sacraments in a really difficult time when we really needed those symbols and rituals. Well, you guys said it well. I guess I want to start, I'm going to preface it, but I want to start with my own evangelist blessings. But I want to go back to Elbert A Smith, who was the Presiding Patriarch Evangelist in the early 20th century. He was Presiding Evangelist for 20 years, the grandson of Joseph Smith, Jr. But he sets a context which was my understanding, when I had my evangelist blessing. And he says, "The chief functions of the blessing are not to delve into the past, or to reveal, in detail, the future. They are to comfort, to counsel, if necessary, admonish, encourage, bless, and above all, help the person in all ways to conform his or her life to the teachings and Spirit of Christ." And I would say that, that's a, that's a pretty good description of my experience of receiving an evangelist blessing. I think I was 19. It was after my freshman or sophomore, mid-term. It was a, over the Christmas holidays actually, and Cecil Gilmore, in Boise, Idaho was the one who gave me my blessing. And we had spent time, we met a month or so before the blessing, and he shared in some explanation about the blessing and kinds of things that Jane has said. And it's interesting how, through the years, there are certain aspects of the blessing that were, became more important than other aspects, just because of what I was going in through my life. But, you know, I think moments of inspiration are ones in which words come to you that have lasting power in the sense that they're not just for today, but they have implications for later on in life. And there, you know, there was some guidance and counsel to me about studying the scriptures about keeping involved with congregational life and other people who are struggling, and succeeding, and falling down, and getting up in their journey with Christ. And then there were some expressions about certain gifts that I would be developing if I were open to that, disciplined to that, and actually some expressions about how it would be my call to work with the poor, and those whose hands were hanging down and knees were weak. And as I've looked back through where I spent most of my years of ministry, it was, it was often with those folks. So, there've been some real affirmations through that. And then when I became Presiding Evangelists in 2007, as Jane expressed, there is the opportunity for what we call a continuing life blessing. And so, I chose to have a colleague, Evangelist Edith Gallaher, who is gone from us now unfortunately, but to give me a continuing life blessing which, of course, in some ways was quite different than my first blessing because it was now addressing me as Presiding Evangelist, as a 50 something year-old, and were words that encountered, intersected with, impacted my life in those years and subsequent years, is still with me. So that's part of it. I think another thing, and I'm going to refer to Danny Belrose, who was Presiding Evangelist before me, is that, though we speak a lot about that, we are speaking about the sacrament of blessing and the particular way in which the sacrament is expressed and how we're blessed through that. But Danny puts it in a larger context, which I just want to share a few words about that. "The heartbeat of blessing is unconditional love, a love that seeks, yet doesn't require, a love that invites, yet never invades. We partake of God's blessing through family, friends, nature, music, art, poetry, the list is endless, every expression of being, the very breath we breathe is God's blessing of life. No one, Christian, non-Christian, faithful, faithless falls beyond the circle of God's love, and blessing." And so, while Jane and I, and you express how important the sacrament of blessing is, what a blessing it is, what an opportunity, what a privilege, it's understood in the context of life is blessing. Blessing is unconditional love. And it can happen anywhere, anytime, through any means, by God's grace in creative expression. So, I think that's a helpful context to put that in. Yeah, a couple of stories. When I first became Presiding Evangelist, one of the things that we noted, and it had been noted that, whereas in maybe my parents' generation, it was just almost

a given that if you grew up in Community of Christ, or The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, as it was called in those days, that somewhere in your late teens or early 20s, you would, you receive your evangelist blessing, patriarchal blessing in those days. And so, you know, I, kind of, grew up in that environment. And still in my years, that was pretty much an understanding. But this past couple of generations, it's just not been as central to the discipleship or Christian expression in our church for the younger people to receive an evangelist blessing. So, yeah, you know, I was hoping to revive that somewhat, not unlike Everett Graffeo had done. And we prepared a couple of tracts that we hoped would or, you know, pamphlets that would help young people understand what it was about. And in our, at our annual gathering of youth at Graceland University, Spectacular, and then the International Youth Forum, which also happened at Graceland and at headquarters, I've tried to find ways to introduce it. But I'll never forget, I was talking about the evangelist blessing to a group of youth, I think some were required to go to my class by their delegation leaders, I'll be real frank with you. But one young man said, "I don't need any old man", referring to me, "to tell me how, you know, to intervene for me about my relationship with Jesus Christ." And so, I was kind of set back on that. But I, but what I realized was that, I wish I would have said, you know, we always know what we're going to say the next day, or an hour later, but to see it more as, I would have said, "Well, what sports do you play? Or what band do you play in, or whatever orchestra at school, and tell me about the age of your teacher, or tell me about the age of your coach?" And I particularly would have used the image of coach because, you know, good coaches bring out the best in a young person. They let them make mistakes. They push them. They drive them. They bring the best out of them. And I think there are ways in which evangelists, of course in a different way, but can bring the best out of a young person, can be a guide for them, can be a support to them, can be an advocate for them, can be, can affirm them. And, because I think so much of what the blessing is about is affirmation, guidance, encouragement, assurance, in heaven knows, in our teenage, and your 20 year-old, but all of life, we can all use that. Another thing I will say, that I was really pleased that, and I worked in the Pacific or the Southwest Field for a number of years, which included Oklahoma, and every four years at youth camp, because most of the kids went to four years of youth camp, every four years, they would have a focus on the eight sacraments of the church. And so, every youth, sometime in their four years would be introduced to all the sacraments. And so, when I was invited to come, and I invited local evangelists to come and share with the kids, get to meet, get them, get to meet them, as well as know about what the, what the blessing was about. And they did that with each of the sacraments. So, that was great. And, you know, I still have the hope that young people will find meaningful ways to engage in a blessing with, you know, some of us old guys, which is often the case. But, well, I'll let that go there. A lot of, I mentioned before that a lot of my time working for the church was internationally. And it's about the time that I became Presiding Evangelist, not just me, but Everett Graffeo before me, and Danny Belrose, the international church in Africa and Latin America, and places in the Pacific, was kind of coming into its own, sort of like second and maybe third generation. And it began to be apparent that now was a time for the elders, the wisdom people, the, those who have had experience in leadership and other ways in the life of the church could now express the gift of blessing, not that it hadn't been expressed that way before. So, we had quite a few ordinations of the first evangelists in Honduras, in Nepal, in India, and, you know, I could name quite a few countries. And I had the privilege of going to, and ordaining several of those evangelists in those countries. But prior to those ordinations, there were, there was like only one Spanish speaking evangelist throughout all of Latin and South, Central and South America. And so, I was asked to offer blessings, since there were no others and I spoke Spanish. So, you know, I went to Honduras for like a week, and in a week's time, I did 10 blessings, which, if you know any church history, if you go to the, Car-, to those archives, that Carla just loves to go to, you'll find that Presiding Evangelist-Patriarch Roy Cheville gave like 2000 blessings in, or more. Jane can look that up, but it was 1000s of

blessings that he gave in his service as an evangelist. Well, I didn't do that. But I do know that going to the Dominican Republic, going to Honduras, some of the most intense moments of my life of preparing, you know, meeting with, getting to know the person, spending time praying together, those kind of things, preparation before I went, but even when I got there, and then sharing the blessing, was very fulfilling, but also very taxing. But those were wonderful experiences. I also wanted to share about family blessing because I think it's a beautiful sacrament and again, not taken advantage of maybe as often as it could be. And this happened in Sri Lanka, and it, you know, as Jane has expressed earlier, usually there's a period of preparation, but sometimes there isn't. I can remember, I'm gonna back up a little bit, but in Honduras, I was able to meet a man in the evening and give him his blessing the next morning and that's all the time we had together, just because of circumstances in his life, working outside of the capital city and being in charge of a big project where he was supervisor of construction and all that. But anyway, we went to this home and the original thought, I think, was that they wanted to have a house blessing, which is distinct from the family blessing. But as we got there and begin to visit with the family in, a couple of days beforehand but also as we arrived, the mother was Christian, and the children were pretty much growing up in the Christian faith, but the father, or you know, the woman's husband, was a Buddhist. And so, I would, had a little bit of trepidation about, you know, I didn't want him to feel excluded in any way. But as we got there, and I began to express about the blessing, it became quite apparent that he was absolutely fine with that. And in fact, he was ill and later on we offered a prayer of, for the sacrament of healing, or the sacrament laying on hands for the sick. But as I began to offer that prayer, my first time doing a family blessing and in a somewhat unique circumstance, and shared a general prayer for the family's blessing. It just felt like the right thing to do at that moment. I was, kind of, in the moment, was to go to each person in the family, lay my hands on his or her head after having heard about each member of the family, and they as a whole, some of their struggles financially and in the church, and that kind of thing, to just pray a prayer of blessing for each, each person in a family context. And I remember Andrew Bolton, and I don't remember the exact words. Andrew was the apostle with whom I was traveling in India and Sri Lanka and Nepal. And after we left, he just turned to me and said something to effect, "Well, that that's what the gospel's all about. That's what ministry is." And it wasn't so much, he wasn't, you know, applauding me in any way. It was just to say, wow, what we've just experienced together is, is holy, is sacred, is wonder, you know, just, I don't know what the words are. But so, I will never forget that experience as long as I live, I hope, of just sensing the sacredness of that family in the midst of their struggles and how deeply and unconditionally God loved all of them, and, you know, Buddhist, Christian, whatever, God doesn't care at that point. It's about, it's about experiencing the heart of God, as someone has said. It's about seeing and valuing our connectedness to God, to one another, to creation. It's about being blessed to be a blessing to other people. So that's some of the things that come to mind for me, Carla,

Carla Long 43:19

That is wonderful Dave. Thank you so much for sharing those stories. I know that some people who are listening to this podcast have never had an evangelist blessing in Community of Christ and just hearing like the different ways it can take place and hearing about when it can happen and how it affects the evangelist as well as the person being blessed is, is quite meaningful, and really beautiful. I really appreciate hearing all of those stories. Thank you so much, Dave. So, I have one more question, but before I ask my final question, is there anything else that you want to add into that, Jane or Dave, before I ask my final question?

Jane Gardner 43:56

I'll just tag on to what Dave just shared about, regardless of all the steps to the sacrament or all the things that have led us to where we are today, that the foundation for me is that this is a

sacrament where God's love is extended to the candidates, or the people who ask for blessing, and that is the primary focus. It is to understand their lives as worthwhile, and people of worth in God's sight. And so, it is so, so important. I think the word "blessing" in the Latin means "to speak well of" and so, as evangelists, that's certainly what we try to do with blessings, with the Spirit's companionship. So, I'll just, one of the logistic, let me say, Carla, for anyone listening who might be interested in an evangelist blessing, you can contact your, if you don't know an evangelist personally, you can contact your mission center office, or your pastor, and they can point you in the direction of evangelists in your area. If that doesn't work, you're welcome to email me at jgardner@cofchrist.org and I will try and match you up with an evangelist in your area. Or, I will say, as things are evolving, I actually have been giving evangelist blessing for people who are geographically disconnected from me. So, I've given a blessing in the Canada East Mission Center, which is far away from Independence, Missouri, but we made it work. And I've also done one in Canada West. And I've done one with the UK so, it's possible to do, not my most optimal, but it's definitely possible to do things that are geographically separated with the primary focus of affirming people and letting them know of God's love for them.

Carla Long 46:11

I appreciate that, Jane. I'm really glad that you said that, just in case someone is thinking about it. So, my last question, because I have a former Presiding Evangelist on here and a pres-, the present Presiding Evangelist on here, so, what's new on the horizon? Is there anything that we should be looking for or looking forward to, that's coming up when, in regards to evangelist blessing?

Jane Gardner 46:36

Um, so, I may let Dave talk a little bit about what he started when he was Presiding Evangelist, relative to looking at ministry with the dying. So, that's one area. Another thing that's going to happen here, probably sooner rather than later, is I believe the Presidency will re-issue that document that you talked about, Carla, with that lovely name. And instead of it being a post-pandemic document, I think they will release guidelines for all eight sacraments, when we are online, period, that has nothing to do with the pandemic. And so those are being worked on right now. And I would expect those out maybe by fall, where we would be talking about, on an ongoing basis into the future, what does it mean to do sacraments online? So that's one of them. And then David, don't know, do you want to say something about how that ministry with the dying kind of evolved?

David Brock 47:43

Yeah, happy to talk about that a little bit. And again, starting in a personal place, I was asked by, I won't share the name at this point, but by a sister in the church, who was probably 80 years old, had just lost her husband, was going through a period of grief and, but was asking about blessing. And of course, neither of, I knew that two days, two years later, she would also pass away. And, but that experience of, first of all, praying for her in her time of grief, but then later, sharing in a continuing life blessing. What a blessing that was to her in those latter years of her life as she was trying to sort out, what's my purpose now that my husband had gone? I'm 80 years old. I'm not as active as I used to be, and she was very active. And that presses the evangelist up against, you know, what is the word of blessing from God for a person in those circumstances, and particularly, as maybe they're lying in a, in a hospice center, lying in a hospital bed, and, you know, want to receive some kind of blessing, some kind of assurance, some kind of hope, in the latter days of their life? And so, a number of years ago, now, primarily in the Seattle area, in the greater Pacific Northwest, some really profound, I would say, and helpful conversation began about, what is the role of an evangelist who often gives a blessing in the first half of life, to the person in their last days of life? And so, they did a lot of great work.

And Jane now has all of that and is doing some continuing work with that. I think one of the things we found is we've begin to have conversation that a lot of questions came up that were, you know, made this a little more complex than we had originally thought. But in a complex that is a wonderful one and, just, and so we've been able to call on people who've, who are very much focused on seniors, whether a medical doctor, or a psychologist, or social worker types of folk. And then, here's something that I haven't mentioned before, but part of this has to do with us as well, because some of you may not know, but most of us who are evangelists are in, kind of, the second or the two thirds part of our life. We're older folk and, and I don't apologize for that anymore, even though we want to have young people but, you know, in the type of ministry we do, it's often through a life of experience, which includes failure and heartache and discouragement, but also joys and hopes and experiences of leadership. I'm going on too long about this, but I do feel there's a real deep opportunity for blessing that we really haven't fully seen blossom yet, but it can, and it will. I think the other thing I would...go ahead, Jane.

Jane Gardner 51:05

No, that's all right. Well, we're taking the ball that Dave handed to me when I, kind of, took this office, and we've been wrapped up with online sacraments for a while, but we're now ready to look again, at ministry with the dying. And so, as early as this fall, the evangelists will have a webinar with Dr. Andy Chatburn and we're also hoping to have other guests like that, who will come and instruct us on ministry with the dying and help us shape, like Dave said, help us shape, what that means for our ministry, what that looks like, what the sensitivities are that we need. It, I guess, bottom line, and what's really pushing us there, along with the Presidency being supportive, is the idea that it's a holy and sacred moment. And lucky for us, 165:5 of the *Doctrine and Covenants* extends the opportunity to family. So, we could foresee a scenario where someone is dying, and their family gathers, and that family, including the person who's dying, would like to have a blessing, an evangelist blessing, as a family. So, there's just some real interesting applications that we're looking forward to exploring. And I'm hoping by the next World Conference in 2023, that we'll have something more solidified, but that's definitely in the future, Carla.

David Brock 52:49

And I would just close my comments by saying that, as I think about these words that are offered in blessings, that they're most often words that touch the foundational truths of the universe, which in faith we declare, and those are that God is, that God is love, that God loves each of us with a love that cannot be measured, that God knows our names. God knows us better than we know ourselves and knowing us just as we are, God loves us. God knows our specific gifts and talents and sees potential and possibility in us that's so often hidden from us. And finally, God calls each of us. So, those would be my closing comments today.

Carla Long 53:44

Thank you so much, both of you. I really appreciate the time that you have taken and the preparation work that you took for this podcast. I'm, I think the evangelist blessing is probably one of the least understood of the sacraments in some ways. And I think it's really important to get the word out, as much as possible, to people who, anybody, as you say, said at the very beginning, Jane, to anybody. You don't have to be a member of the church. You don't even have to be a friend of the church. You don't even have to know what Community of Christ is. But anybody who wants an evangelist blessing can have one, and what a wonderful and amazing ministry that is to offer. So, thank you both very much for being on the podcast. And I appreciate you very much.

Jane Gardner 54:27

Thank you, Carla. We appreciate the opportunity.

Josh Mangelson 54:37

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