

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.

Robin Linkhart 00:34

Hello, and welcome to another episode of Project Zion Podcast. This is your host, Robin Linkhart, and today we are bringing you another edition in our series, What's Brewing, where we explore how God is showing up in the neighborhood, and people of faith are living out mission in transforming ways. Today we are here with Carla Long, Latter-day Seeker Minister in Utah, who serves in the office of high priest/bishop in Community of Christ and seventy JoAnn Fisher serving as the Mission Center Invitation Minister on staff with Inland West Mission Center, which includes Utah. Hey, welcome Carla and JoAnn. It is really great to have you with us today on Project Zion Podcast.

Carla Long 01:26

Hello, everyone.

JoAnn Fisher 01:26

Hi, thanks.

Robin Linkhart 01:31

Now, Carla and JoAnn have played key roles in Latter-day Seeker Ministries, and both have supported seekers in Utah and other locations across the church; however, their journeys are uniquely different. Today, we want to hear their stories. We also want to hear about how this ministry has impacted them and what they've learned along the way. But first, let's take some time to get to know them just a little bit better. So, let's start with Carla, who is no stranger to our Project Zion Podcast listeners because she hosts our Percolating on Faith series, and several other episodes across the board of what we offer here on Project Zion. Carla, tell us about you.

Carla Long 02:26

Well, hi, everyone. Robin, I am actually a little stressed out because I'm on, usually on your side of the microphone, and that feels a little bit easier to me. But just in case you don't know me, as Robin said, I work in Utah as a Latter-day Seeker Minister. I'm the pastor of the Salt Lake City congregation which is incredibly fun, and incredibly challenging at times as well. And I think I'm going to talk a little bit more about that during the podcast. I have two amazingly beautiful children, Liaden, who's three, and Ari, who is 18 months, and a wonderful, supportive, awesome husband named Kusma, whom I met when I was working for the church in Europe. I worked in Europe for five years as the bishop and financial officer for western and eastern Europe. He's from Ukraine, and we just met and we fell in love. And now he lives in Utah with me. And sometimes I wonder if he wonders what was going on, which I think he does quite frequently, but I'm super excited about the podcast, Robin. Thanks for asking me to be on.

Robin Linkhart 03:25

Thanks so much, Carla. Now let's hear from you, JoAnn.

JoAnn Fisher 03:28

I am a Mission Center Invitation Support Minister, and I live in Idaho. I live about 45 minutes north of Boise, in the woods. We own 40 acres of property, and I live there with my husband, John. I have children also, but they are in their 40s. So, that's kind of giving you a little clue about how old I am. But I have two daughters, Andrea and Amy, and two wonderful son-in-law's and four grandchildren. I came from a background, I've, even before working for the church, where I worked with hospice, which will become relevant a little later. I have held the position of elder and pastor. I've been a district president. Then I went to the work, work for the church full time and have been engaged for most of my employment in seeker ministry. So, thanks for having me and giving me an opportunity to talk about that.

Robin Linkhart 04:31

Thanks so much, Joann. It's always great to get to know our guests just a little bit better before we take off on to our topic. So, each of you got involved with Latter-day Seeker Ministry at different times and also in different ways. JoAnn, tell us about how that evolved for you.

JoAnn Fisher 04:53

You know, I love this question, and as I thought about my response, I remember definite things and then there are other things like, Whoa! How did this happen? So, the reality is, that I, I'm not good with dates, but I think it was about 2010, 2011, I was invited at a World Conference into a meeting to talk about what was happening with what we refer to as LDS seekers, and Susan Skoor had been invited to Sunstone. And so, because of where I live in Boise, which is heavily populated with LDS folks, I was invited to that to contribute to that. Later, I was invited to come to Sunstone. And Robin knows all this because, Robin, you were my seeker mentor and buddy, and we, you were my Batman to my Robin, and we did that together. And it was a wonderful adventure, full of learnings and laughter and tears, and just lots of ways that we encountered people in different environments, like Lindsey Hansen Park, who we started a house ministry there. And other folks who we, I remember at one point, we met someone named Mark, and I will only use his first name, but I remember meeting with him at a restaurant and him really inquiring about Community of Christ, and then calling Robin and saying, I think we have a live one, because I was so surprised and thrilled that people really were sincerely looking for us. And I had to rethink how I thought about who we are.

Robin Linkhart 07:03

Thanks, JoAnn. And you've continued to be engaged in Latter-day Seeker Ministry...

JoAnn Fisher 07:07

Yes.

Robin Linkhart 07:07

from the early days through to now and we'll hear more about how that's taking you different pathways. But it's really interesting to listen to you reflect on those early days and how things just, kind of, connected. One thing led to another without a definite roadmap, for sure.

JoAnn Fisher 07:25

For sure.

Robin Linkhart 07:27

All right, Carla, tell us about how you found yourself part of Latter-day Seeker Ministry?

Carla Long 07:34

Well, you know, I actually had to do a lot of reflecting as well. When I was a financial officer, I had been a financial officer in two different locations, one in Sierra Pacific Mission Center, which is northern California, and one, as I mentioned before, in Europe. And I was working for the church in California from 2005 to 2011, and even back then, there was a Sunstone activity in San Jose, California, and I was invited to speak as a woman priesthood member, and I had no idea what Sunstone was. I had no idea what I was doing. But I was just invited to be part of a panel. And so, I was there, and I was wandering around wondering what was going on, and why I was invited, and what was happening. And it was, I don't remember a time, like, everything about my time in California, like, but I remember those, that specifically, because I felt like such a stranger in a strange land. So, even, I'm, like, 15 years ago, I was starting my ministry with Latter-day Seekers. Fast forward to when I was working in Europe from 2011 to 2016, and things were starting to bubble up. Things were starting to happen in Europe. People were star-, very, very few people were approaching our ministers and asking questions. And then in late 2015, early 2016, people really started asking those questions and wanting to know more. I remember sitting in a house in Munich, Germany with some dear friends, and they were asking about Community of Christ, and they were Latter, or they're members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And part of me was like, oh, man, I don't even know if we can support these people the way they need to be supported, the way I really want them to be supported. And so, I was sitting there with my mission center president, Joey Williams, and we just talked and talked and talked and I realized that Community of Christ had to be ready for this. There was a moment, right then, that I said, "Yeah, this is going to happen, and we have to be ready." And it wasn't too long after that, that I was invited to go to Utah and become a Latter-day Seeker Minister in Utah. And I think that experience, literally sitting in that house in Munich, Germany, really was the catalyst to me saying, "Yes" to that request, because ever since that group, those, that couple, I realized that this is where I wanted to be. I wanted to hear people's stories. I wanted to walk with them on their faith transitions, and I wanted to be a person that could teach about Community of Christ in those ways. So, I moved to Utah and, of course, was completely and utterly immersed in Latter-day Seeker Ministry. And I have learned so, so much about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and even more importantly, I have learned a lot about Community of Christ, just like JoAnn said. Like, it's almost like I have done a deep, deep, deep, deep, deep dive into who we are, so that I can explain it, and, to people who don't know anything about us, which has just been, it's just been so much fun.

Robin Linkhart 10:38

Thanks, Carla. I remember too, when you were still serving in the Eurasia Field, there was a Sunstone at Birmingham, England, and you did a session there. I think that was in, like, February of 2016, and the couple from Germany that, where you were with them, and it clicked for you, I think they attended that Sunstone as well. So, gosh, just the connections just never stop happening. So, in early 2020, we

found ourselves in a global pandemic, and by mid-March, Community of Christ had paused all of our physical gatherings across the church. That meant no meetings were held in any of our buildings worldwide. And as things eventually got a little better, and we began to reopen, we followed very specific guidelines protecting the most vulnerable among us. As of today, and we're recording this September 2021, COVID is back on a rise and many gatherings are paused again. How did seeker ministry change with a global pandemic? And how have you personally connected with seekers and ministry in general terms during this time of pandemic? Carla.

Carla Long 12:08

So, the pandemic's been awful, of course. It's awful. But in some ways, the pandemic has really been good for a lot of different kind of ministry options. You know, like when the pandemic wasn't on, I felt like I was running here and there and here and there, meeting with people, and being with people, and going to church, and doing church activities, and I spent a lot of time running. And when the pandemic hit, all that running stopped. I no longer had to run. And so, we had to come up with really creative ways to reach the people that we were reaching before, but without all the running, and without all of the face to face talking, which I really desperately missed. So, actually, when I look back at the year and a half that we have been in this pandemic, we've done a lot of stuff in the Salt Lake Congregation, and it's been really great in a lot of ways and we, but we also missed seeing each other's faces in a lot of ways. So, of course, we did Zoom worships. Like everyone else, we did Zoom worships. And so, every Sunday morning we get together at 10 o'clock and have a worship service. But what was the most, I think, most exciting part for a lot of people was afterwards we'd stick around and chat, just as a Zoom group. And sometimes those chats would last one, two, even three hours. We were just so hungry to talk to people outside of our families, probably, that those chats became a bit of a lifeline, I think, for a lot of people. And that was really, really important. So, the worship services were great, but the chats afterwards, I think, were really what was healing for a lot of people. We also did, like, Facebook Live worships when we had something, you know, special and exciting happening. One of our members had become a yoga instructor during the pandemic, so they taught us, they taught a whole yoga session online. And so, we all learned how to do yoga from a member of our congregation. We did lots of different spiritual practices, and we learned about different spiritual practices. We had someone in our congregation now who is a baker, and he taught us how to bake biscuits as a spiritual practice. It was like his own little cooking show, but with a spiritual practice element added to it and it was so cool, and it was so fun. We had lots of people joining us from all over the globe for those and for other worship services we did. I realized that I wanted my congregation also to stay connected to world church, and since we're in a pandemic, and no one's going anywhere anyway, we had, like, almost unlimited access to world church leaders, which maybe the world church leaders didn't like, but I really liked it. So, I did lots of different interviews with people. I interviewed Stassi Cramm and Scott Murphy of the First Presidency. I got to interview Richard Howard, who is a beloved historian in Community of Christ for many years. So, they got to learn more about Community of Christ from their world leaders, world church leaders' own mouths, which was, I think, really cool. And, you know, we got to, kind of, humanize each other and see that, hey, we're just people too, and we're trying to figure out this thing too, just like you. Another thing I did, which I thought was kind of fun was, I did this, kind of, "interview" series. I did interview in quotes with members of my congregation. So, I would just grab a member of the congregation and say, "Hey, you want to talk to me?" And I would ask them about what food they were cooking? and what books they're reading? and how they're making it through the pandemic? just

like conversations that would normally happen, maybe in a normal church setting, that we missed each other so much. So, I just tried to reconnect those people with the congregation, and there'd be lots of comments, and there'd, just be lots of, well, you know, just reconnection was what I was hoping for. And I called that series, "How you doing?" from *Friends* and Joey on *Friends*. So, I also, so, when, in a normal Sunday, in the Salt Lake City congregation, we would have five or six new people walk through the door just checking us out. It's a lot of people all the time. And I realized that they're pretty much asking the same questions over and over and over again, and I didn't want there to be a void of answers to those questions. So, I started doing, like, small vignettes, small videos, like little sermonettes, and they're all on YouTube, and I answered questions, and I talk about ordaining women. I talk about the worth of all persons. I talk about how we see Joseph Smith Jr., the one true church questions that I would, we would always get. And so, those videos have, I think, in some ways, not totally, but in some ways, filled a void of answers to questions that we would always seem to get. And, this is my last thing. I know I'm talking a lot. Zoom Church has been actually really good for the Salt Lake congregation, because it's really scary for a person from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to walk through our doors, very scary. They might be giving up a lot just to walk through our doors. But I don't think they're giving up quite as much if they just click on a link and join our worship service. So, I was shocked. I was completely shocked that when we started meeting again in person at the end of May, our numbers had doubled, because people felt like they knew us. They felt like maybe this wasn't such a big step to walk through our doors. And we had a lot of, a lot of new faces and a lot of new people to meet in 3D, once we came back to in person, and it has just been really exciting. And so, this pandemic has kind of helped mission for us. And I know it might not be like that in any other place in the world, but in Salt Lake City, Utah, it's helped us a lot.

Robin Linkhart 18:08

Thanks, Carla. That's really interesting and exciting to hear how in the midst of something horrific, there has been this sizzle, excitement of mission, evolving and being lived out in totally different ways, but still keeping that human connection. JoAnn, tell us about what it's been like for you and the different things you've been involved in during this pandemic.

JoAnn Fisher 18:36

Well, I am a people person most of the time, and I enjoy spending time with folks in their environment and listening to their stories and getting to know them better. So, I was involved, along with my other duties in the mission center, with Idaho house church, which takes place in Idaho Falls, in a member's home, and we were up to like 12 or 14 people right before the pandemic hit. And then after that happened, we did pretty good on Zoom for a while. I was so pleased with how that was going. But then as time wore on, I think we got some Zoom fatigue and people really missed what happened at the apartment, which is where we met, and we had a more formal worship. And so, our routine was typically to go to a coffee shop on a Thursday morning and just, kind of, have what Carla was talking about, the catch up, the experience. How are you doing? What's going on? We often process what's happening, new developments in the LDS church that sometimes they want to process with us, and that typically happens at the coffee shop. But then, house church also happens at seven in the evening, which I have always been amazed that people would go to the coffee shop and talk to us for a couple of hours, and then come back the same night for worship and more conversation. But that happened once a month, and we were no longer able to do that. And so, we sorely missed it. We can take communion,

you know, via Zoom, but that's not quite the same. They like to be served by women. And so, it just feels a little, it felt a little different. We had a Zoom meeting last Thursday and we had two Alexes on there. One was Alex, who has been with Idaho Falls from the beginning and was a student at BYU, and we have known Alex for two or three years. But then, we had a new Alex, who was just investigating and found out about us. And so, it was wonderful to have that experience again. During the pandemic, two of our families moved. Alex, the first one I referred to, actually graduated, moved to Salt Lake area, and, but continues to get on our zoom gatherings, and feels alliance and a closeness to the group that's in Idaho Falls. And then two families with children, one moved to Texas, because of their employment, and the other moved to Georgia, but we continue to have relationship with them. And, in fact, one of those families joined Children's Book Club. So, let me say a little bit about that. We were concerned about the children that we have encounters with, that there weren't opportunities for them. And so, Karin Peter, who is a President of Seventy and lives in Olympia, Washington, and myself, started a Children's Book Club, and it's for kids aged four to about nine. It, that has touched over 20 children, and it is based on our Enduring Principles, but in a very open way. It's not super religious. We have peace practices, which are sort of spiritual practices, but we call them peace practices for kids to help deal with the pandemic, and not being able to connect to their friends the way they used to. These little kids faithfully come and listen to the story, and discuss with us, and then engage in peace practices that help them through the week. And we do that every Thursday afternoon, and we have kids from three different time zones that come to that. So, that has been a deep and abiding joy. Some of those kids want to meet with me to talk to me about mask wearing at school and other things, so I feel like we're really creating relationship. And one of the good things is we follow best practices of Community of Christ, which means that a parent needs to be in the room when their child is on Book Club. And one of the wonderful things that happened is that when we had a gathering for women, which we also do, oh, every month or so, one of the moms agreed to be in my group, even though I had never met this woman in person, but she thought she knew me. And she knew me from Book Club and sitting there every Thursday, listening to me interact with their child, with their children, she has two kids, and love who she loves. And so, I think that is a powerful ministry that is geared and directed toward children, but there's some wonderful overlap that happens there. And you know, I'm a grandma, and it's very authentic to who I am. And I love seeing their faces and their pictures and sometimes some of the crazy stuff they say. And I get to see a side of my colleague that I don't see that often in Karin, who is wonderful and engaging with those kids. And it's been a real thrill. And then, like I said, we have a women's gathering that was birthed out of a retreat at our Samish Island Campground that happens in Bow, Washington, and we had several seekers for a weekend. Those relationships have remained. We have a group there that continues to meet. In fact, we're starting up again in the fall. And so, we also have mission center Zoom worship. We try to support other worships and direct folks, direct seekers to the Salt Lake worship or other things that are happening. But it has been a difficult, I don't even know how to say this, a difficult, but joyous time for us. And we're looking forward to things going back to how they used to be, in a way, and at the same time, being informed about, more informed about what's really important, and being able to focus on that.

Robin Linkhart 25:57

So, it's really interesting to listen to these two different journeys and to see the contrast between how adapting to online, and Zoom, and worship, and gatherings in different ways in Carla's context, got some traction that we didn't necessarily see in a small group in Idaho, southern Idaho, migrating online,

although it still was a vehicle to help keep people connected. And then to see how things that were birthed in Samish Island at a women's spirituality retreat with Latter-day Seekers migrated to online, which opens up the door for women, regardless of where they live, to be together and share a common journey. And Kids Book Club online, totally online with little kids, again, not limited by geography, but an open invitation for kids gathering. And, as you know, JoAnn, our guidelines for working with children in Community of Christ endeavors to always create safe space for kids. And part of the overflow of that is the parents in the room. They, kind of, get to be in Kids Book Club and connect with relationships as well. All very exciting things. So, we've, kind of, had a 10,000 foot overview of how you each got involved in Latter-day Seeker Ministry, and a real great update on how things have shifted here in the pandemic, the last year and a half. Now, I want us to just, kind of, go deep into what it's been like to walk with Latter-day seekers, and how has it been different and the same with other ministry contexts that you both have experienced. You're both seasoned ministers, have encountered and supported folks during their faith journeys in many different contexts, both with longtime Community of Christ members, and congregations, and mission centers, as well as all kinds of seekers, and now in the last several years, in the context of supporting Latter-day seekers on their journey of faith. So, tell us what that's been like and how it's been the different and also the same. JoAnn?

JoAnn Fisher 28:29

I said earlier, that prior to my employment with the church that I worked for hospice, and a lot of the skills that I developed there, I use with Latter-day seekers, which means it's a lot of listening and hearing what their questions are, listening to their fears. And I don't always have the answers, and assuming that, it would be arrogant of me to assume that I do. I can answer questions, and I can talk about my own experience, but the reality is, each person who's going through a faith transition, is going through their own faith transition, and I can be informed by what's happening with others, but the reality is that what they need from me is a little different each time and so, to be authentically there and try to create safe space for them to feel what they need to feel, and to partner with them as they journey forward without having my own agenda as to what that's going to look like. Wow, I was a little bit more of a controlling person than I thought, I think. And you just have to let go of that. And you have to be authentically who you are with them and understand that, like the work in hospice that I did, that it is a profound and humbling experience to be invited into that. And that that is a sacred time to both of us. And that, when you understand that, and that the Holy Spirit is in charge, and you are there to facilitate the best you can, and to support, and to love them in a way that provides space and support, that's your job. And so, it has been rewarding for me, fulfilling for me. I've created lots of relationships that I hope to maintain the rest of my life. It's also been scary sometimes. And I remember when, oh, my gosh, I was first starting and in California, and I did not know how I was going to fit into this. But I did. And it has felt like a calling, and felt like, that I could contribute, even though I'm not the best historian and, but I can contribute authentically to people's lives and help them celebrate where they are, even when it's scary for them. And to, for them to not feel threatened by me or by the church. And sometimes I've had to be really honest, and say, "You know what? We're kind of homey church. We're not slick, and big, and we don't have all the money from where you came, but we will love the heck out of you. And as long as you want us with you, we're committing to that." And that has been an incredible thing. I recall once in a Idaho Falls meeting, we asked what they needed from us, or what they wanted, or what direction they wanted this group to go in. And there was a big silence. And then there were tears, and they said, "We're not answering, not because we don't know, but no one has ever asked us that

before?" And that, that informed me so much, how much we all want to be heard, want to be seen, want to be loved. And so, that's what I've learned. That's what I'm trying to do. And that has been the blessing of this ministry from me.

Robin Linkhart 33:09

Thanks, JoAnn. Carla, tell us about your journey in that regard.

Carla Long 33:15

So, sometimes Community of Christ is really insular. Like, we know our people. Our people come to church every Sunday. Our people go to reunions, and church camps, and retreats, and we know them. We know what to expect, and it's comfortable and lovely. But when you have a congregation of almost 90% converts to the church, and more and different people are walking through the church every Sunday, you really never know what to expect. And that has been so exciting for me. So, like Joanne said, Joanne said, it so, so, well. You know, this ministry is really a lot of listening, a lot of sitting down with people, sometimes even over coffee, which is exciting, coffee, or lunch, or just sitting down with people and just listening. Because also like what JoAnn said, a lot of times people haven't been listened to. And I think that's true across the board, not just in faith transitions and faith journeys, but across the board. We have forgotten how to listen to people, and how to have the ministry of presence, which is actually, I think, the most important ministry that we offer; the ministry of presence, the ministry of our full attention, and the ministry of our walking with people. So, that is, that has just been a huge, huge part of what I do. I, you might find this hard to believe, wonderful listeners, but I actually hardly do any talking at all in those times, and I really just ask questions, or just sit and be with people. So, I also, what's important for me is to let them know that while I don't understand exactly what they're going through in their faith transition, because I've never been through a faith transition like that. What I really want to do, and what I, is my honor to do, is to walk with them in their journey and just to let them know that they are not alone. And that is pretty huge for a lot of people, that I'm willing to walk with, that I'm willing to be there through each step, good or bad, and that I want to, I just want to do that. It's not something that I have been told to do, but something that I want to do. I think, in this, also in this, I've learned that being a no pressure or low-pressure church is pretty important. People who are Latter-day seekers have always, kind of, been a part of something with an agenda, and people can smell an agenda from a mile away. And so, what I really try and do is make sure that they know that I have no agenda. Well, I have a little agenda. My agenda is that they find a spiritual home somewhere. If it's with us, awesome. If it's not with us, that's okay, too. I want them to find a spiritual home. Because one of Community of Christ's Mission Initiatives, of course, is to pursue peace on earth. And it's my belief, and I think a lot of people's belief, belief that when everyone finds their spiritual home, peace will reign on earth. And so, I mean, when people find their spiritual home, we are one step closer to peace on earth. The other thing I try and talk about if, when I do talk, is that I remind people that I think that they are incredibly brave for doing what they're doing because, in a lot of cases, when people leave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, their families, extended families could be upset about it. Their friends could be upset about it. Their neighbors could be upset about it. Their church family could be upset about it. Their job, at least in Utah, and where I live in Utah County, which is 80% Mormon, their job might be affected. I, I've had two or three people tell me that if they, if their employers knew they were no longer LDS, then they could lose their job. And so, this is a really, really big step, a really big change, and a super scary change. So, I make sure and know, or I try to make sure that they know that

I think they are incredibly courageous for taking this step, and for doing what they feel that they need to do to be authentic and live their lives authentically. And so, I think that's important to let people know. And since I've lived in Utah, I've realized what an incredibly large step that is for people to take. So, those are just a few of the things that I try and do and try and talk to seekers about if they want to talk. And if they want to learn more about Community of Christ. First things first, I want to learn more about them.

Robin Linkhart 38:06

Thank you, Carla. I want to turn the dial just a little bit now and ask you, how have you perhaps seen Community of Christ differently as you've walked with Latter-day seekers exploring who we are, as perhaps you have looked through their eyes at what they see? And so, the flip side of that is, what have you learned about Community of Christ as you've walked with seekers? JoAnn.

JoAnn Fisher 38:37

Well, I learned that I took a lot for granted. And that while Community of Christ is not perfect, and that I'm old enough to remember a time when women were not ordained, and even the "one true church" paradigm that we used for a bit, I have also been privileged to witness the growth and the development of our theology, which is different than it was then. But what I've come to embrace is that, I mean, I thought most churches did that. And that's not necessarily so. And so, even though things were hard, and I had some complaints as a teenager, and a feminist in the 70s, I have witnessed growth and struggle, and people trying to live out their understanding of God's will for humanity, and that we embrace nature and creation, and all the things that we do, speaks to my heart. And so, I have, when I listen to seekers talk about the joy they're finding in Community of Christ, it has reminded me of the joy I have found in Community of Christ, but took for granted. It has caused me to be, what, I want to say proud, but I also don't want to seem haughty, but it has caused me to be proud of us and the struggles that we have faced, to live into who we authentically believe we are called to be. And I just appreciate the relationships that I've formed here, and things I've learned from the church, and want to contribute to that. And so, it has strengthened my own testimony of what the church can add to your life, and how each one is called to serve within the context of their lives in authentic ways.

Robin Linkhart 41:17

Thanks, Joanne. How about you, Carla?

Carla Long 41:21

Um, this one's really easy for me to answer. And this is the one that I actually want the entire church to know. Friends, we are the coolest church that I know. And we are certainly, certainly the coolest church in Salt Lake City. There is no doubt about it. Everyone knows it. And people, every person who walks through our doors, every single one of them says, "Why haven't I heard about you before? Why don't I know more about you? And why don't you advertise yourself more?" Everyone who walks through our doors is incredibly happy that they have done so. Well, okay, I can't say everyone, but most people who walk through our doors are. We have worked in Committee of Christ, like Joanne was saying, I am incredibly proud of our church, JoAnn, and, but I feel kind of weird saying that too. Because we have, we have gone through so many things to be who we are now. All of the struggles that we've gone through, all of the pain, and the hurt, and the hardships, and the deep theological work that we have

gone through has been hard. But it has gotten us to a place where people talk to us, say, about our theology, and they're like, "Oh, my gosh! That makes so much sense. Theology never made sense to me before. But this makes sense to me." And I am just so incredibly happy that we have done all of that tough work. Is there hard work in the future? Yes, yes, there is. There's absolutely more things that we need to work through. But where we are now, at this point, with our Enduring Principles, with our Mission Initiatives, with our Basic Beliefs, is at, it's at a wonderful time. It's a great time to be a minister in Community of Christ, because it's so fulfilling to talk about these things that we have worked so hard for. So, what I want people to know, and what I've learned is that we are the coolest church on the block. And we should be really, really proud of that fact, because, and really proud to talk to people about who we are because, friends, we are amazing.

Robin Linkhart 43:23

Thank you, Carla. I'm, like, really jazzed. It's always exciting to hear the good news and it, looking at ourselves, or even the world, through other people's eyes, can be so informing in lots and lots of different ways. But I hear what you all are saying. So, along that vein, Carla, what have you learned about yourself in the context of this ministry, because ministry is a wild journey that, it just always does some shaping and forming of the minister along the way? Carla?

Carla Long 43:52

Amen. It is a wild ride. So, as I mentioned before, I was a financial officer in northern California and in Europe, and I love numbers. I'm a math major and I think numbers are fascinating. And I was a math teacher, high school math teacher for three years in Independence, Missouri, and I love numbers. And so, I enjoyed being a financial officer. And I can definitely see how being a financial officer in Community of Christ promotes mission and helps mission to happen. There would be no mission that happened without money. We have to have money in order to make the church go around. That is 100% true. But what I've learned about myself is that I feel incredibly called to this time and this place in Utah. I feel called to this ministry. I feel called to sit down with people and be with people and be a friend to people who desperately need a friend. If I have no other skills, which I do, but if I had no other skills, I'm a really good friend to people, and I want to be friends with people, and I want to support people. So, this ministry feels like home to me. Numbers and financial officering felt really good and was super fun, but this ministry feels like home.

Robin Linkhart 45:09

How about you, JoAnn?

JoAnn Fisher 45:12

Well, what I've learned about myself is that I have grown into this, that in the beginning, I was confused and scared a lot. I don't even know what I was scared of. But, yikes, I do remember my eyes rolling back several times. Now, well, I still don't have a poker face, I embrace this and I embrace the part of me that is willing to respond with my whole heart, and that I have developed relationships that I am so proud of but that aren't, it's not just me giving, it's mutually satisfying and empowering, and it just feels like home, and that these are my people. And I don't know why I'm getting emotional, but I remember when we went from being a smaller jurisdiction to a mission center. And I remember thinking, oh, my gosh, what is this going to be like? And then, as the pandemic happened, and other things, and I'm

going all over the place to Montana, to Utah, to Wyoming part of the time and Oregon and Idaho, and Washington, I'm like, oh, this is, this is never gonna work out, because I'm gonna be tired and cranky. And the reality is, now I just love so many more people, and I miss them. And I'm sitting in Idaho right now pining to be in Utah with Carla and missing our fun times, Robin, where you got me, actually, Robin, you got me into this. So, I appreciate you. I thank you and it has been a blessing to my life, and I will continue to strive to live into those relationships.

Robin Linkhart 47:39

Thanks so much. You know, as I'm listening to you, I just keep hearing this sense that we are promoting building and living into communities of joy, hope, love and peace along the way, regardless of where people end up on their journeys. So, I want to ask both of you this question too. How has it been difficult or challenging? And on the flip side of that, how has it brought joy or fed your soul? And I think we've heard some glimpses of how it's brought joy and fed your soul, but, Carla?

Carla Long 48:15

Yeah, so it's not an easy ministry all the time. Joanne and I have talked about a lot of the amazing parts of it. But it's also very difficult. I'm going to talk about just one little difficulty that, or challenging thing that's happened in, for me and my ministry. So, I mentioned before the Salt Lake congregation is probably unlike any other congregation in the entire church. We're a congregation that's about 90% convert, converts from the Mormon Church. And while that's wonderful, it's also challenging. For one thing, faith transitions aren't just, you get through them, and then you're done. And you never ever think about that before. Faith transitions, even for people who have been with us for five or six or seven years, they're ongoing, and they can be, at times, continually painful. And there can be triggers that happen. So, we, in the Salt Lake Congregation have people going through all parts of a faith transition, at all times. So, some are just starting through their faith transition. Some are in the, have moved through a little bit more, some have moved through a little bit more. And some have, you know, some are priesthood members in Community of Christ. But I just don't know if you're ever completely through a faith transition. And living in Utah, and having the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints be the water that we swim in and the air that we breathe a lot of times, can be difficult for people. It is difficult for people. So, leading a group of people who are going through those different faith transitions that, who are all different times, can be really hard to minister to everyone in the way that I want to minister. So, there's been many, many, many times that have fed my soul, but I want to talk about one of them. So, what's really awesome about living here in Salt Lake and having the congregation that I have is that the women have really, really stepped up in the Salt Lake Congregation. So, when a woman leaves the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and joins our church, or becomes members of our church, women are automatically empowered. Not only could they become priesthood members, which would never be something that would happen in the Mormon Church, but even as a member and not a priesthood member, they can already do so much more in Community of Christ than they ever could in the Mormon Church. Like, for instance, I asked a woman in our congregation to, if she would get communion ready, break the bread, and pour the grape juice in the cups, and she started crying. She's like, I cannot believe you're asking me. And I was like, well, could you? And she was like, she was just so honored to do that. And pre-pandemic, every single Sun-, every single communion Sunday, she would be back there, with joy in her heart, and a big smile on her face, getting our communion ready for us. And it was just so wonderful to see that empowerment. And that women can be these incredible

ministers, which we've all, we've known for almost, well, we've known for a long, long time now, so. Anyway, the, it's so wonderful to see people blossom in this new environment. So, that's been really, that has definitely fed my soul.

Robin Linkhart 51:37

JoAnn, how about you?

JoAnn Fisher 51:38

Well, I want to piggyback on what Carla said, and that a lot of times work with LDS seekers are folks who have been traumatized, and who continue to be traumatized or triggered by things. And Carla explained how their lives are so connected to the church socially, culturally, even down to their employment, that there is a lot of trauma, sometimes, that goes with that. And even in mixed faith families, where one spouse wants to leave, but the other, the other isn't quite ready, and then what about the children and just all of that. And so, one of the things that I know is that if this is a desire of your heart to work with seekers, or people who are grieving, which is what I see this as, you have to do some self-care, and make space for yourself. There have been times when I have listened and listened and listened for a weekend, and gotten in my car, and drove and cried, just because my heart is broken, and I don't know what else to do, but that, and pray for them. And pray for me that I show up how I need to show up. And so, I think it is good to also talk to other ministers who are doing this, and who have this experience, and can help you process, kind of, what's going on and going on for you, because it can throw you into a little, not really a faith crisis, but frankly, I had some very bad feelings about Joseph Smith, and I had to work through some of that myself. So, I just want you to know that that's what comes with this territory. And that the joy has been the colleagues I've met, and the lives that I've seen changed and the relationships that have developed. I mentioned Alex before, who was a BYU student, and Alex has graduated and moved. And Alex is a trans-man. And Alex continues to get on every month with Zoom and messages us just for the heck of it, and is beloved, and we are beloved by him. And so, those are the things that feed my soul. And he did say to me once, "You know, you saved my life in more ways than one." And I believe that, and I said, "You know, it goes both ways, that your faithfulness to this group, and your encouraging us to just keep showing up as a bunch of old grandmas to love on ya, is very affirming to our lives, too." And so, I just appreciate so much, even the difficulty of it, because it reminds me that we're human, that we need each other, that we need to take care of ourselves so we can be the best version of the love of Christ that we can be.

Robin Linkhart 55:31

Thank you, JoAnn. So, we've gotten to have a window into your particular and unique journeys with Latter-day Seeker Ministry, and also hear some of the overlap in the midst of that in the two stories that you all share with us today. So, as seasoned Latter-day Seekers Ministers, do you have any quick tips or things that you would say to others who also feel a sense of call to ministry with Latter-day seekers? Or maybe to people out there listening to us that find themselves walking with seekers in their town or in their congregation already, folks that just walked in. JoAnn?

JoAnn Fisher 56:18

Well, I would say, listen, listen, listen. That is the most important thing. And to even seek for yourself some backup. If you make contact with me, or Carla, or others who work with LDS seekers, we would

be happy to support you in supporting them. And there are wonderful resources that help. You know, sometimes it can be a bit overwhelming, and you're not sure where to go or what to do. But the most important thing is to be loving, and listening and present.

Robin Linkhart 56:58

Carla.

Carla Long 57:00

I'm so glad JoAnn went first on this because that's all true, and I wasn't gonna say it. So, I mean I forgot to say it. So, I'm so glad you went first. I was gonna say, and I am gonna say, this is a ministry that will expand your heart and break your heart all at the same time. But more than anything, you will understand, I think, God's deep love for all of us. And you'll understand Community of Christ way better than before. I mean, it's, so, your heart will expand and break and you'll understand who God is more deeply. You'll understand Community of Christ more deeply. It's pretty, it's a pretty exciting ministry, and I think that throughout the podcast, you've heard enough stories to understand what I mean when I say your heart will expand and your heart will break.

Robin Linkhart 57:51

Thanks, Carla. You know, one of the questions that we get sometimes is, are there other seekers out there, not just Latter-day seekers? And yes, of course, there are seekers and spiritual refugees all around us. So how has Latter-day Seeker Ministry equipped you to walk with all kinds of seekers and spiritual refugees from lots of different walks of life and background? JoAnn?

JoAnn Fisher 58:20

Well, recently, I've had an experience with a couple of Jewish folks. And that has been, I think, the, what it's taught me is not to assume anything, and to show up and be present and have a curious mind, because they bring stuff too, and that we are not just teaching and ministering, but we are also receiving and being ministered to, and empowering people to live into their authentic faith journey. And so, celebrating parts of their journey, that can be celebrated, and part of our journey that can be celebrated, and finding connecting points is what's, I think, important, and lends authenticity as to who we are, and who we claim to be. And I just, I think that's the most important thing, that no matter what tradition they come from, or no tradition, it is to be patient and to hear and to just be the love of Christ, wherever you can.

Robin Linkhart 59:46

Carla.

Carla Long 59:50

I don't know, maybe two years ago, pre-pandemic, maybe three years ago, a man walked through the door of the Salt Lake Congregation and we were chatting and I was telling him, and I'm like, "Oh, so you know about the *Book of Mormon*. You know about the *Doctrine and Covenants*." He's like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm Catholic." I'm like, "You're what?" I was so shocked that someone walked through our door that wasn't a former, or member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. So, I had to take a giant step back. And, you know, I, not

that I have, like, the same answers for everyone, but there are certain things that I say to ex-Mormons, you know, and I had to take a step back and be like, "Okay, well, let's talk about our theology and Catholic theology and how, you know, they're the same and how we are different." And that was actually really fun for me. So being a Latter-day Seeker Minister, has helped me go into that deep dive into Community of Christ, so I could do that, so I could say those things. And so, I could make those connections for him, like I normally do for an LDS seeker. So, he actually joined our congregation and he's a wonderful member of our congregation, and he's actually one of my favorites. He sends me snarky texts during the worship service to make me giggle, which I do not appreciate at all, friends, if you're listening to this. Actually, I do. And so, it's really, it has really helped me because of all the reading I've done, because all the conversations I had, because not just conversations with seekers, but conversations with other Latter-day Seeker Ministers, I've learned so much more about who we are, and how we look, I suppose, to other people of other faiths. So, it's been really helpful for me.

Robin Linkhart 1:01:37

Thanks, Carla. I think another thing that I've recognized along the way is that in Latter-day Seeker Ministry, we're dealing with a lot of people who have been wounded deeply in the name of religion, in the name of God, and journeying with people who have this huge depth of spiritual hunger, which we realize is part of the human condition as spiritual beings, so spiritual refugees of all types, and seekers who have been wounded in the name of religion, or God, or Christ, for that matter, have very similar needs and sensitivities. And I think it's helped us, as a cadre of Latter-day Seeker Ministers, understand how to meet people where they are, and help reframe and be present with them, as you each have pointed out so poignantly, to create that safe, sacred space and meet people wherever they are, has been such a powerful gift. What are your hopes for Community of Christ as we journey into the future with all seekers? Carla?

Carla Long 1:02:48

I, mine are simple. I hope that we are open, and kind, and compassionate, and willing to walk with people throughout their journey. I also hope that Community of Christ can continue to develop our theology and finding ways for people to join us and be a part of us, if they can't walk through the door. I hope, that our, and those are two separate thoughts, theology and walk-, being able to help people know who we are. I do hope we develop our theology more and continue to learn more about who, as we continue to learn more about who God is, that we can be a church that more fully represents who God is to the world. And then, I hope that congregations can continue to do worship on Zoom and in person, those hybrid worship experiences, so we can have as many people be a part of us as who wants to be a part of us, if they can't leave their house, if they're scared to walk through the door, whatever their reason is. I really hope that we can continue to work that model, that hybrid worship model that President Veazey talked about, and that we have found to be so important during the pandemic.

Robin Linkhart 1:03:59

Thanks, Carla. JoAnn?

JoAnn Fisher 1:04:01

Well, gosh, when you let Carla go first then she hogs up all the good answers. So, I agree with everything that Carla said. And what I also hope is that we're sensitive to the needs, to what we see. So, I see that Community of Christ really could benefit from developing, and I know that we are some resources for families and children, and that we are willing to look, not only at the world but at ourselves, and try to fill, and live in, and support people who are looking for the love of God. And that, if they find it in us, that's wonderful, and if they don't, that we don't take it personally, but we wish them well, and that we show up in the world the way we would like other people to show up in the world. And that is a lot. So, if we understand our theology, and we understand ourselves, and we understand what it means to be the love of God, that to me, each time we do that, makes the kingdom of God that much closer, makes, we're actually experiencing it one life, one day, one moment at a time.

Robin Linkhart 1:05:27

Well, you've both filled me up with hope today, that's for sure. Thank you so much. We always like to make room for anything else you might want to share with us. So, is there something that you want to say that I haven't asked you about?

JoAnn Fisher 1:05:42

Um, I think you've asked all the things that I wanted to cover. But I would say this. Carla and I are not the only ones out there doing this. I'm proud, so proud of those colleagues that are with us in this. I'm so proud of the people that we're striving to minister to, who have the courage and the generosity to invite us on the journey with them. And I am proud to be part of this cool church, and I am, I truly am. And if I could gift that to someone, I would want to because it is what Carla said, where your heart is broken, but expanded and filled and it's satisfying, just the way other relationships that are meaningful to you. And people's lives aren't always what they're cracked up to be, but then are better than they're cracked up to be. So, you never know. And I would just invite people to open your heart and your mind to this.

Robin Linkhart 1:07:00

Well, Carla Long and JoAnn Fisher, thank you so much for being with us today. This has been a wonderful experience. And a very special thanks to all of our listeners. If you would like to hear more stories about mission, check out our What's Brewing series. If you might have questions for our guests, you can email Carla at clong@cofchrist.org and JoAnn at jfisher@cofchrist-iwest.org. If you want to learn more about Latter-day Seeker Ministry, check out our website, latter-dayseekers.org, that's latter-dayseekers.org. And to learn more about Community of Christ, visit cofchrist.org. This is your host, Robin Linkhart, and you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. Bye, bye.

Josh Mangelson 1:08:11

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