

Josh Mangelson 00:17

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

Carla Long 00:33

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long. And today you're listening to the series Sodas and Steamers where we talk about youth ministry in Community of Christ and how it's going. And I'm super duper duper excited to introduce my friend, Laura Bolton, who lives in Sacramento, and she's going to tell you all about herself, but she and I have been friends for I have no idea. 20 years, 15 years, 10 years, I don't even know. If it was 20, you're super young so if it was 20 years, you'd probably be like, a really little child. So anyway, probably hasn't been 20 years. But it's been a really long time. So Laura, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Laura Bolton 01:12

Hello, I'm Laura. It's definitely not been 20 years. Unless you befriended me when I was 10. And you were 20, which would have been amazing. And I'm sure I would have loved you. But we've definitely been friends for somewhere between 10 and 15 years, and they have been a magical 10 to 15 years. I know that you introduce yourself a little bit before you're just like, hey, I'm Carla Long and welcome to my podcast. But like, I just wish the people got to know you as well as we got to know you because you're such an incredible person. Carla and I have had adventures all over the world together. And I hold those memories near and dear to my heart. I wish I had time that I could just sit here and tell you about all the cool things that I've done with Carla Long. But instead, I'll just put the challenge out there that I hope one day all of you listeners get to have cool adventures with Carla because she is like a 10 out of 10 person. And she's amazing. I know that I didn't talk about me. I just talked about Carla. But like She's so awesome when...

Carla Long 02:20

I feel like we should just continue this for the podcast. Before you introduce yourself, though, listeners, you should know that Laura and I visited the Harry Potter studio tour in London together. So that's something you could definitely be jealous about. Definitely.

Laura Bolton 02:36

And it was magical in so many ways. So anyway, my name is Laura. I am sort of a new youth minister out here in California. I've been here. I mean, it feels new. I moved here literally right before the pandemic, like I moved here in February of the pandemic. And you know, things closed down in March. So I never had the opportunity to meet my my youth here, or to do any in person activities, which we'll talk a little bit about later. But I'm, I'm new here to California, I live here with my spouse, David, we have a baby who was born during the pandemic. And so they're very classic. We've been calling them a coronial right now, because you know, they don't know anybody. It's, it's funny, and maybe a little bit sad. But David and I live here. And we have just enjoyed traveling together for the past six years that we've been married and you know, recently took on the adventure and challenge of parenthood, as well

as this move across the nation because we're originally from Independence right outside Kansas City. And so we come with the this little Midwest twist to, to the beautiful mountains and trees of California. And so that's me, that's who I am. I like to read and listen to music and travel and talk. I like to talk which is probably good for a podcast. So that's me. I'm Laura. And this is Carla.

Carla Long 04:16

Thank you for introducing me as well. Oh, Laura you already crack me up? So your you did youth minister activities and independence right when you were living out there? So youth ministering is not a new thing for you. But youth ministering during a pandemic is definitely a new thing for you.

Laura Bolton 04:34

Right? So in Independence, you know, I started going to camps as a child. And then once you're like 15, you know, you can go as a counselor in training, and then eventually as a counselor, and then you can go as you get older, if you get asked to be a director and so I've done all of those things. When I was in college and high school I would spend five, six weeks at camps because I wanted to be at everything. I mean, Youth Ministries has always been where I was called, I knew it so young, like, this is what I wanted to do. And, and I was really lucky to be able to do that. I had the support to be able to just take that time and go do it. And well, of course, the love of it. And so that that worked in my favor as far as like really following my heart into this ministry. But yes, youth ministry, during a pandemic, it's new for all of us. It's a fun, fun little adventure, we all got to go on.

Carla Long 05:34

Oh, it's been super fun. So I'm very curious about what you have done as a youth minister, during the pandemic. You're a very creative person. And I love that about you. So how have you had like youth activities during the pandemic? What have you done?

Laura Bolton 05:48

So, um, I think in general, we in youth ministries everywhere, what I've seen as we tried different things. But there are things we could rely on previously, like, we know, certain events will do well, like people really love camps. And people like lock ins, and retreats. Like those are things that are very classically popular, well attended, fun events. And they allow you time together to be both spiritual with one another, like really deepening your relationship to God. But also like having fun doing ropes courses, or going to the beach and going swimming. Like, those things were really, really classic youth ministry things. So then comes the pandemic, and you can't do any of that. Like, what what is camp? What is a retreat? What are any activities, when they're on Zoom? And that was the challenge, like, what are we even going to do? And at the beginning, it sort of felt like I was scrambling, trying to figure out, I think we all were, what is zoom? How do I use Zoom? What does zoom activity look like? And at the beginning, it was just hanging out, hey, every week at this time, you know, my senior high are going to get together and every week at this time, my younger elementary are going to get together and, and that's where it started. It was with the simple weekly Hangouts. And then as time progressed, we started to grow in our confidence of what we could do, but also wanting to change it up like the kids liked meeting once a week, but it was time to do something different. And it was perfect timing, because we're heading into summer camps, like, what are we going to do for camp. So last year, I came up with this idea of camp in a box. And that almost can sound constricting, because camp is purposefully not in

a box. You know, we're always thinking outside the box trying to find new things. But last year, it was time to like, pull in, what can we do. So camp in a box was created. And so I had all my kids register. And like, amazingly, we almost had the same number of kids come to camp online that we would have had come in person. And that showed me the connection these kids have with one another. Like it's powerful. Like that is the purpose of these camps of what we do, we create this community. So these kids still want it to get together. So we had everybody register. And then I got with my directors, and we planned this week of camps and activities. And we got all the supplies together. So were we going to do a craft, were we going to have a devotion setting. Were we going to have snacks every night. What did we need for each activity of each day of this camp, and we put it all into a box, and then we shipped them out. And so every kid before camp received a box and they'd open their box. And we made camp T-shirts, and they had a snack for every day. And we did crafts and we'd sent like paint. And we did like rock painting with one group. And then, you know, we even tried to do campfires online, which many of us, I think, at this point have experienced trying to sing online with a group of people. And it is kind of awful, but also kind of amazing. And so we did, we did campfires. And it it didn't feel like camp as we knew it, but it felt like something new. And just as wonderful. Like we thought when we started we were like, are the kids going to be able to reach that deeper level? Are we going to be able to talk about real things? And then it happened? It happened naturally. A couple hours online together every day. By the end of the week, the kids were eager to talk about things. We're sitting there, we're chatting, we're like we're doodling, because you know you sometimes kids like to keep busy. And we're talking about empathy in our world and compassion in our world and like what it means to be a Christ follower. And like, how, how their view of themselves is sometimes diminished by others' view of them. And like, these are really big topics for kids. And we're doing it over zoom and, and like they just made a smore in the microwave. And it was not how we knew it, but it was something good and, and wonderful. And, and that is what the pandemic brought us. Something new, something different, but also something wonderful.

Carla Long 10:38

Ah, that sounds so good. And but What a load of prep work that must have taken to be completely prepared. Like sometimes at camp, you can fly by the seat of your pants and everything works out, there's no flying by the seat of your pants, when you have camp in a box. You got to get it done, you got to get it out. That's, that's tough.

Laura Bolton 10:56

It was, and like putting together a lot of boxes to ship out. And then I like showed up to the post office with like 30 boxes to ship out. In case you didn't know there's a limit to how many boxes you can ship. They... I had to do 10 and then get back in line and do another 10 and then get back in line. They made me keep going back through the line.

Carla Long 11:22

So camp, camp in a box sound like it was a really, really good thing for a lot of kids. That's really awesome. What other things have you been doing throughout the year besides camp with the kids.

Laura Bolton 11:33

So after camp, there was this push to continue trying new things. And so that's what we've been doing. And that started with one we did The Good Place. Do you know The Good Place, it's a TV show. It has some really, really incredible topics that, that it hits on. Um, if you haven't seen The Good Place, and you're of an appropriate age, I definitely recommend it. So we, with my senior high, we started a watch party. And every week we watched a couple episodes. And then we discussed the topics because there's like morality and the afterlife and God and purpose. Like we watched the fun show. And then we got together and we chatted about what came up in the show. And sometimes it's just silly things like, "Oh, Did you see what so and so was wearing or?" But, but that really allowed us to... it kept us together every week, which was important, because I think the kids started to feel afloat school was online. Many of them had missed prom had missed their senior camps, like they weren't necessarily in a great space because they couldn't see people and their world was shrinking. So we maintained this weekly gathering where we watch The Good Place. And that's just what my senior high. I've started a couple book groups I have, I mean, of course, a Harry Potter reading, reading club that meets and we made that intergenerational so that some of our younger kids had a chance to really interact with some of our older members. And each week we get together, we read a chapter and we do a spiritual practice. With a passage from the chapter we do character blessings. And that has pulled in a group of people that I really don't see other places and that's part of the great thing of having so many options is that people come to different things, people come to what feels good to them. So Harry Potter is great for some people. The Good Place is great for some people. We do Sunday School online before our morning worship. And that, that just feels, that just feels normal and easy. Like that works really well with we get the kids together, we talk about things and then we go right into worship. But then every Sunday after worship, I also have a peace book club. We use a material that was created maybe in your field Carla, there's there's a Kid's Book Club. And so we've been doing the Peace Book Club every week. Every week we get kids together. But some of my favorite activities. I'm just like gonna keep talking about things and you can like cut and do whatever you want. Okay. Um, I have done a couple craft activities and my all time favorite my baking activities. So I have done like a great, Great British Baking Show type thing, right? We told everybody the ingredients they needed to buy, but I didn't tell them what they were baking until they showed up and then everyone was sent—they could choose whether they wanted it to be a hard challenge or an easy challenge. So they got the full recipe or the pared down recipe and then everybody had to make... We did chocolate eclairs the first time we did this, and I mean, some were really bad. But some were really good. Like, just like the Great British Baking Show. It was so fun. And I, we did one just recently and it was so, so popular. The kids were like, "Can we do this again?" So we ended up doing, like a Messy Church where we had breakout rooms and people could choose which breakout room they wanted at church. And so I did a break a baking breakout room. And I mean, of course, all the kids came to me. Who wouldn't want to make a cake during church, you know? So we just, we're constantly trying new things. We do trivia nights, and I stayed up on New Year's Eve with everybody last year. And everything we try. I mean, we have people come to everything, but not everything is what I think we would call successful. And then we don't have it again. Like, like a couple people came. But okay, that didn't work out. So we try new things. We have a writing workshop coming up, we just had another trivia night. And we're doing a white elephant, a virtual white elephant in December. We're doing ornament making as well, in December we're doing, we do prayer gatherings. And we have a gratitude, gratitude thing around Thanksgiving. Right now we're doing Socktober. We're trying to raise money to give to houseless people. And our kids are getting

together this next Sunday, we're going to make little sock puppets and talk about Socktober. And, sorry, I feel like I've just done on and on. But I'm like, we're just trying new things. Because that's like what it is, when you're thrown into this new situation, and you have no clue what to do. You just have to try new things. And sometimes they don't work. And that's okay, we just go on to the next thing, like not a week goes by where we're not trying something new. And, and that's what the pandemic has brought us is the opportunity to try a lot of new things.

Carla Long 17:03

Here in Utah, we call that throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what sticks.

Laura Bolton 17:08

I was literally thinking about spaghetti in my head. Like my that is where I went. I mean, I didn't even talk about our pajama parties, which are one of the, like funnest things we do. We invite all the families and it's later at night, we get together, we just have all the kids say, hey, everybody's in their pajamas. And then we read a bedtime story together. And then we send the kids off to bed. Like I love pajama party. I mean, everything I do I love. And I mean, that's why I'm doing this because I love it so much like I am here, to try things to keep these kids together to keep them interested in community and like have them exploring their relationship to God. And like that, there's so much joy in that for me.

Carla Long 17:51

Okay, we have to go back to the Great British Baking Show, because how did you do it? So like you told everybody get what ingredients they should buy? Right? Then you got everybody on Zoom? And you told them the recipe, you gave them the recipe? And then did you leave and come back and show the results? Or did you all stay on zoom the whole time? Oh, we all stayed on zoom the whole time. And I had made mine beforehand, so that I could be really engaged with people.

Laura Bolton 18:19

So you know, when you're watching the show, and they're like, the technical challenge comes up, and it's like, oh, they're going to be making whatever they're making. And then they go to Paul and Prue in the tent, and they have like the perfect ones. Mine did not look perfect. But that's sort of what we did. We were like the bakers have just been given their instructions. This is what they'll be making. And it was fun to get to watch them. And to like watch them, you know, have their moments of success and their moments where they were like, "I don't think that looks quite right." It was it was a really fun, unique experience is why we've done it again, because it worked really well.

Carla Long 19:02

Please tell me that you asked everyone to have an English accent.

Laura Bolton 19:07

We've not asked everyone, but we did have at least one person who maintain their accent the entire time, although they went the route of who is that like kind of eccentric cook she has a show about her: Julia Child. Yeah, she was kind of like that the whole time. It was wild.

Carla Long 19:37

So it sounds like you have really been super busy. You know, like sometimes it doesn't feel like you're busier during the pandemic. But when you look back and talk about everything you've done, you're like, Whoa, we've actually done a lot of stuff. (Right.) So what advice would you give to the youth ministers out there who are struggling during the pandemic and wondering about what to do? What advice would you give to them?

Laura Bolton 20:01

So, a couple things that I've done is one talking to other youth ministers, because like none of us are required to come up with every answer on our own, like, collaboration is incredible. And we've met, and there was a whole event where all the youth ministers got together a few months ago. And we talked about what we were doing and what we were trying and what was working, what wasn't working. So one. collaboration. Reach out to other people, Hey, what are you guys doing? What's working? What's not working? That has been amazing. My other, my other bit of advice is to try everything. Like if you think that might be fun, do it, like, do it. 100% Go for it. And don't be don't get caught up in the numbers. Because I really hate that like, oh, well, how many kids came even if it's only one, even if it's only two, you know what you're there for that kid or those two kids? Like, it matters for them. Like you're there for them in that moment, it can still be incredible. And like, sometimes we really get caught up in in the dwindling numbers of like everything we're doing. We have a tendency to cancel things, because not very many people are coming, like, do it anyway. Like really, because it can mean so much to that to that group comin. And it offers you the opportunity to get to know that 1, 2, 3, 4 youth even better. Like than if there were 30, 30 youth there. So find the opportunity to grow in every moment with your campers. They're not always campers, sometimes they're just bakers.

Carla Long 21:43

I love that advice. I think that's super important. Because it is so easy to get discouraged when you put so much work into something and only a few people show up. But some, sometimes it's not about quantity. Right?

Laura Bolton 21:57

Right. It's, I almost feel like it should never be about quantity. When we're worried about quantity. Sometimes quality slips. And I've seen that in, in other areas, when we're planning activities like, "Oh, well, we'll get more people if we..." you know, do some specific activity, or "if we don't have worships, or sermons" or, you know, anything that like, some people may find boring. But like, what is the point of your gathering? If the point of your gathering is to only have fun, well, then maybe that's the way to go. But like, that's almost never the point of what we're doing. Like, we want to be challenging how our youth are thinking and how they're feeling. Like we want them to be learning and growing and asking questions. And, and so it's really important that we have fun, of course, obviously, yes, like, I love fun. But it's also important that we're like, offering them opportunities to dive deeper. So quality.

Carla Long 23:09

Yeah, I think that sometimes we sell our kids short, and think that they can't go to that deeper place when you and I both know, and many of the people listening here, definitely know that kids want to go to that deeper place. I mean, it can be hard and can be scary. And it can be emotional. But kids don't

get a chance to do that, like in school necessarily, or maybe not even with their parents or with their family. They need that place that they can reach a deeper part of themselves. And that's what we can offer them. Even though it can be a little uncomfortable, even though it can be a little awkward, even though it can be a little bit weird. Perhaps that's what we do with Community of Christ. That's what we can offer them. And that is why they keep coming back. They can go a zillion different places for fun. I mean, there's fun everywhere, right? They can go wherever they want to for fun. They don't always have that deeper place to get to.

Laura Bolton 24:00

Exactly, exactly. And to do it in a place where you get to also have fun. It's two birds one stone

Carla Long 24:09

And with people that you trust.

Laura Bolton 24:12

100% Yeah, absolutely.

Carla Long 24:15

So you, since we're talking about numbers and things like that, I feel like the next question is pretty obvious. What do you see for the future of youth ministry in Community of Christ?

Laura Bolton 24:29

So I don't know how I would have answered that question like, even two years ago, one year ago, but as I've been here in California, one of the biggest challenges that is coming my way. One of the things my youth asked me about encouraging me to grow and think and be curious about is inclusivity diversity and justice driven activities and purpose. And so my kids are have, keep asking me how—they call it purpling. I've not been, obviously to a camp at our campground, but I guess we have red cabins and blue cabins or something like that there's something about the color of the cabins. And the idea of purpling is that you're mixing them. So like, what do we do with our youth who don't fit into our binary system? Either youth who are transitioning or have transitioned, or our youth who are non binary? Where do they fit into our community? Do we have space that is safe for these people? And, and the thing is that the answer is no, we don't yet. And so my, my youth keep challenging me, what are we going to do different at camp? How are we going to make it inclusive? And so that is my next big challenge. You know, we have the incredible program here, we have a beautiful campground and we have the people we have the money. What we need to work on is how we bring everyone in. We say we are inclusive, that we have the worth of all persons and unity in diversity. But like our campgrounds don't show that our churches don't show that. And that is where my future of youth ministry lies, is an opening, the opening what we do to everyone. And that also falls outside of just gender issues. Like we are looking at everything. Are our churches, and our campgrounds accessible. You know, are we making sure that we are being open to people of all backgrounds? Because I would I would say no, we haven't been in areas are working on that. I am seeing campgrounds being updated. I'm seeing churches, making their areas more accessible. But we have so much more to do. You know, and so I, I'm so excited about it. I see hope in our future because, because we're starting to have these these questions, these conversations. Where can we go? What can we do? What comes next? And that's

where I see youth ministries. This generation is different. I don't know if you felt it, but they are ready to change the world. And they are not comfortable with what we have been doing the way things have been done. And so they are, they are ready to make a, make a change to how we're doing things so that other people can be included. And I am all for it. So I will listen to my kids. Because they're teaching me right now. They're teaching me where we need to be working. What we need to do better in.

Carla Long 28:06

I mean, what I am hearing you say is that we can't be complacent. We can't say "Hey, Community of Christ is welcoming, welcoming and inclusive?" We can't We can't say that anymore. Because that that may have been true 10 years ago, and maybe we were super welcoming, then. But there are people who are maybe uncomfortable walking into our space now. And so what you're telling me is that we can't just sit around and say we're okay as we are. And I think the youth have always taught us that, always. I feel like change in the church and change probably in outside of the churches almost always come from the younger generations. And so it's so great that they have a youth minister like you, Laura, who's listening to them who's also being a voice for the in the older adult sphere. That's a hard place to be for you though too.

Laura Bolton 29:00

It doesn't, luckily it doesn't feel hard. Like I have heard some of the disparaging comments that some of our older members have made regarding these topics. And I this is unrelated to my job and what we're talking about. But my one year old uses they them pronouns, we strongly believe in giving them the opportunity to tell us who they are. And that's a hard concept for new people. Or for some people, it's a new hard concept. And some people really don't like it. They refuse to do it. Even when they don't know the sex of my child. They choose a gendered pronoun and they just go with it. But I... like here's what I've got to say about that. I don't care if you think it's hard. I don't care if you disagree. I'm not here to make you comfortable. You've been comfortable. You have had a community that loved and supported you. And we now need to offer that community to people who haven't been loved and supported. So I am here for everyone else, and I will continue to work towards their inclusion in our community. Our table is big, our table is infinite if we would only let it be. And so I'm pulling up chairs, and I want everyone to be here. And it doesn't matter if you're uncomfortable with it. And that that may that may be blunt, and like mean, but like, we we cannot be focused on how we're feeling when there are so many others who are being left out and unloved.

Carla Long 30:42

Amen. My goodness, that was really important for me to hear. And really important, I think for a lot of people to hear. Because I think it is very easy to just say, "Well, I'm not going to do that, because I don't want to and guess what I'm all about me." If we are calling ourselves disciples of Christ, then we can no longer be all about me. We have to be all about we and so I appreciate that reminder, Laura. That's really important. And I'm so glad that we went there in this conversation, because youth ministry isn't just about fun and baking shows and watching The Good Place together and talking about it. Youth ministry is treating everyone, including children and youth, as if they are people of worth, and that their ideas matter, and their thoughts matter, and who they are matters, and can change lives for the better.

So I'm really glad you brought that up. It's, it's an important ministry that you're offering. And I'm so, so glad that they have you to speak for them and speak to them.

Laura Bolton 31:47

No, like. I... in my time knowing you, I know that you you're with me in these places. Like you're also listening, you're in a very unique space. And I don't know if you want to take this out, but your members have come from a very unique, not awesome background. Many of them are are struggling to find a place where they're included, where they feel like they belong. And so I think you understand what I'm doing. what I'm trying to do with my youth, making them feel included, and like they belong somewhere. It's, it's a big task. And I don't know, I don't know how much I'll be able to do in my time here. But I, I have big goals in mind. Changes I want to make. And luckily, I don't need everyone's permission to to make kids feel loved. Like, that's it. Like I don't need your permission, I don't need, I don't need your support. I, I'm going to do this because the kids need it. I have lots of support. So sorry. I don't mean to make it sound like everyone's against me, because that's so not true. I am backed by so many incredible, incredible people, we have such a capacity for love. We we just need to start using it.

Carla Long 33:17

And helping, and I think perhaps, I don't feel if it's ,part of your job or all of our jobs is to help everyone to understand that what you just said, actually, so. So listeners, if you're in a position to have those conversations with people who don't understand perhaps what our youth are going through or what our youth are facing. Then if you have a chance have those conversations. I know they're hard conversations. I know they're awkward conversations, but they're really important conversations for our youth, for our young members, for people who are questioning so many things about themselves. So I really hope that people have listened to what you've had to say Laura, and, and understand exactly what life is like for some people.

Laura Bolton 34:04

Yeah, I, I really want people to know that youth ministries is incredible. Like I have so much fun doing it. I don't know if I would have chosen during a during the pandemic because I loved youth ministries the way they were before. But it has allowed me an opportunity to grow in so many other ways. And allowed us to explore youth ministries in a new way, for which I am grateful. But youth ministriess is amazing. And then it really challenges us to keep moving forward, to not allow ourselves to get stuck. Keep moving forward and listen to your youth. They have a beat on what's going on. No, they have a beat on the pulse, pulse on the beat? Well, messed that up. They have fill-in-the-appropriate-phrase-here, what's going on in the world. Our kids know what's going on better than we do. We used to know what's going on. And now they know what's going on, and it's time for us to listen to them. Turn an ear towards your kids because they know what's up.

Carla Long 35:07

Well, thank you so much for being here. Laura. And, thank you so much for I would even say, having prophetic voice. I think it's really important what you just said. And I appreciate hearing it. So thanks again for being on the podcast.

Laura Bolton 35:18

Carla, as always, it is such a joy to talk to you. You are such a bright spot in, in this church and ,I I'm just like so excited to see where you go.

Carla Long 35:30

Laura, thank you so much. (Well wait) This podcast is really made me feel great too. So okay, thank you!

Laura Bolton 35:37

Thank you!

Josh Mangelson 35:37

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