ES 46 | Evangelist Blessing
Project Zion Podcast

**Josh Mangelson** 00:17

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

**Carla Long** 00:34

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long. Today I'm speaking with Brad Johnson, who is part of the pastor team of five people in the Olathe [Kansas] congregation of Community of Christ. Just recently, or Brad, maybe you can tell me when you did that, the Olathe congregation went on a journey of having a congregational evangelist blessing. Since the Salt Lake congregation is thinking of doing the same thing, I figured, hey, maybe there are other congregations out there thinking about this and wondering what it's like. So, I'm inviting you all listeners to eavesdrop in on our conversation. So hello, Brad, welcome to the podcast.

**Brad Johnson** 01:15

Well, appreciate that. Welcome, Carla. I'm excited to share with you. I'm a longtime listener and a first-time participant, so this is exciting for me. The date of our blessing was November 18 of 2018. In a way, it seems like it was a long time ago. In another way, it just seems like yesterday. It's one of those experiences that stays close to you, and you build on it.

**Carla Long** 01:45

Oh, I'm excited to hear about it. But before we jump into that, Brad, tell us a little bit more about yourself.

**Brad Johnson** 01:51

Okay. I was born in Southern California. I grew up in a church family. My mom's family goes back a few generations in the restoration movement. My dad’s family was churched in I think six, seven, eight different denominations as he was growing up. Every time he got a new housekeeper, they got a new denomination. He eventually joined our denomination; I think while I was in grad school. I grew up in Downey, California, which is about halfway between Dodger Stadium and Disneyland, a couple important places in my life, and spent a lot of time at Camp Buckhorn. I don't know if you've ever been up to Camp Buckhorn, Carla, but the listeners will know it's one of the most beautiful places in the world. And it's a very formative place in my life as far as religious experiences and making connections with friends. Some of my long-term friends are from those experiences. I went to high school in the 60s. It wasn't a question of if I was going to go to college, it was not even a question of where. I went to Graceland College. I was fortunate enough to meet my wife, June there. June was June Fisher. We got married while we were undergraduates, and kind of did the typical Graceland thing as married couples, living in Kansas City, Missouri for a couple years while she finished her degree. She was a nursing major. I went over for grad school at UMKC and then we moved to California and lived there for a number of years. I think 13, 14, something like that. Then got transferred to Texas. We were in Texas for a few years. We've been in Kansas City now for 23 years, attending the Olathe congregation. The other congregations just to give them some kind of recognition that we attended, there was the Carrier Parkway congregation in Texas, the Orange congregation in Southern California, and then the Lenox congregation in Southern California and Lenox has been closed. I don't know, 25 years probably. It's been closed for quite a while now. So that, in a thumbnail sketch kind way, is my background and experience with the church.

**Carla Long** 04:21

Boy, you really get around. That's pretty awesome. So yeah, so let's just jump into it. The first question is pretty basic. What is a congregational evangelists blessing?

**Brad Johnson** 04:36

I'll tell you that’s on the church's website, you'll actually find the right answer, but I'll give you my answer for the purposes of the podcast. It is an opportunity for us to have some evangelists, and I imagine that some evangelist blessings might have just one evangelist doing it, but ours, we had five evangelists, have them kind of dig into who we are as a congregation and as a people, and offer a very specific blessing and direction for us as a congregation. It kind of helps us get in touch with what our mission is and what our call is as a group and a community.

**Carla Long** 05:23

That sounds pretty cool. That sounds really awesome.

**Brad Johnson** 05:27

Yeah, it's a neat experience.

**Carla Long** 05:29

I know that you went through a pretty good preparation for it. Can you talk to us a little bit about what your congregation did to prepare for the blessing and who actually did the blessing for you?

**Brad Johnson** 05:42

Our preparation probably started 10 to 15 years ago with one of our previous pastors. Bruce Ryder started talking and thinking about it. Maybe the time wasn't right then. Probably late 2016, a member of our pastor team at that time, Mary Gill, started talking about it. She'd had conversations with Jane Gardner and said, hey, this might be a good direction for us to go in. We started doing some activities in our congregation. We didn't specifically say, this is to prepare us for a congregational blessing, but in a way they did. One of the things, I think was pretty formative for us as a community was, every Sunday, we had two or three different testimonies. Almost every Sunday, two or three different testimonies from members about why I love being part of Community of Christ. It was a chance for us to get to know, people who often didn't speak at that church. You know, there's a few people that are going to be up front, giving sermons and doing other things and there's a lot of people who come to our congregation. Our congregation probably has an average attendance of 120, something like that. We probably have 200 active members. So, there were a lot of people who aren't upfront talking a lot. But here was an opportunity to hear different people's experiences, everywhere from probably as young as eight years old, seven, eight, nine, something like that, up through some of our older members, who gave their testimonies about participating in the Community of Christ. It was pretty powerful part of our experience. We had kind of a community building experience in that. Every Sunday we had one particular hymn that we picked out and we played that in some manner, saying it or had it as background music, prelude, or something every Sunday for the year. These were some community building things that we went through. As that was going on, the four pastors at the time, we started talking about the need, or possibility of what we could achieve with a congregational blessing, how the congregation would accept it, and would they want to move forward with it. We started exploring it.

We took a lot of very planned, measured steps, walking towards a congregational blessing to make sure that we'd have full support of the congregation. It's a pretty important piece of the equation as far as the support of the congregation. If the congregation just shows up one Sunday and evangelists offers a blessing, it probably is not much of an experience. It's really about the journey to the blessing as much it is the blessing. We did things like in the fall, let me get my years right 2018, 2017. We had our congregational retreat where we focused on the theme of “blessed to be a blessing.” Kris Judd, who was kind of our lead evangelist was our guest minister for that and had a chance to start talking with the members of the congregation of what a congregational blessing is and what it would mean for us. Kris presented to a priesthood meeting about what a congregational blessing is, we're thinking about doing this, we're thinking about moving forward, least exploratorily. We got their opinions and we got very positive feedback. We then had a meeting for all interested persons in the congregation and got a lot of support out of that. Somewhere along that line, we recruited our full team of evangelists and we ended up with five. In addition to Kris, we had Tom Arnold and Bob Gardner who both have family members that attend our congregation. This was a second congregation for them, Olathe. They were very comfortable with us. Then Mikal Shedd, who was at one time our chief financial officer for the Mission Center knew us She had a cousin who had attended for years. Mikal was our fourth evangelist. And then Greg Clark. I don't know if any of us in the pastorate knew Greg, but what a fabulous guy. I assume you probably know, Greg.

**Carla Long** 10:38

He's an awesome guy. He's a good friend.

**Brad Johnson** 10:40

Yeah, he really is. He was our only evangelist that I didn't know in advance. They participated with us throughout most of 2018 by taking a monthly service with one of them presiding. They all spoke once or twice. We probably had an evangelist at just about every Sunday service in the congregation, talking to people afterwards, figuring out who we were, us getting a chance to figure out who they were. When we had our branch retreat in 2018, we had all of them -- that's kind of jumping ahead of our process. We had an evangelist come to our monthly pastor meetings, either in person or on FaceTime. On Mother's Day 2018, we had a three-and-a-half-hour morning service that was all about preparing for the blessing and introducing that congregational blessing to the whole congregation by doing activities, learning our spiritual type, and different things like that. It was a really super day.

During the preparation for the blessing, Shane Adams and Allie Arnold got real involved. They took over that service for us. They were real integral in our preparation for the blessing. A main focus on the blessing preparation was the last 40 days before the blessing. Before the 18th, we really ramped it up. We had a branch retreat. It was an event that we held at our congregation, rather than going to one of the campgrounds. We did that in order to get more people to attend. And we had very good attendance. We introduced the tools of the blessing. We had a blessing companion which Allie Arnold prepared. That was a focus journal. Every week there was a story, some kind of inspirational story based on Words of the Week. Every day we had activities, journaling activities, scriptures, and other things to read and focus on. This journal became an integral part for a lot of the congregation while preparing for the blessing.

And then we also had a 40-day activities piece that was put together by three of our members. Ashley Arnold, Brooke Trachsel, and Laura Beckwin put together an activity. It was on a clipboard. It was for families with younger kids. It was focusing on each of the 40 days leading up to the blessing, getting them prepared for the blessing. As we mentioned before we started recording. Shane and I hosted a podcast. We did about two podcasts each week on the blessing. One of them would be with one of the members of our congregation about the actual theme of the week. We had, like I said, different words that were chosen, like adventure. We talked about adventure and how this is an adventure. We talked to one of our congregational members about the aspect of adventure in their life and how that was leading them towards the blessing. And we had other interviews with pastors, former pastors of the congregation. We had one with Janae Grover and, of course, we had each of our evangelists on to offer their stories. That was a lot of fun, at least it was fun for Shane and I and hopefully for anyone who listened to it. That is it, in a nutshell. I know I just kind of went through that fast, but that was what our preparation for the blessing was. I don't know if I missed anything that I should have told you or are curious about. I'll give you a chance to say something.

**Carla Long** 15:22

Well, gosh, Brad, I am really, really blown away. I tried to make notes while you are talking. This is some serious preparation. You journaled every day. You did inspirational stories at worship services. You went on a retreat before it where the focus was on the evangelist blessing. You did 40 days of activities. I'm not sure if I understand exactly what that is. You did a podcast with four different evangelists at four different times. Wow. And you talked a lot about the adventure of going on this adventure. I'm sure I missed something, too. That is really, really impressive. Like that is organization to the tee. I'm pretty blown away; I have to tell you.

**Brad Johnson** 16:04

Yeah, it really was, it was very intentional. And organization is not my strength. I'm still trying to figure out exactly what my strength is. But it wasn't organization. It really was part of the other people in the group. We were very organized. I should have prepared this in advance. Let me grab my journal. Let me see what I did with my journal. Here it is, we had five different or six different words. I should share those with you, adventure, trust, gratitude, grace, community, and blessing. Each week, the focus was on a word. And there'd be the story. It might be a story out of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* or some other source that related to adventure. Each day there would be an individual activity, a journal reaction, a scripture reflection, an inspirational quote of the day, and prayer thought places to journal. Some days there were things to fill out and artwork to do. June and I were really fortunate. When we started on day one of our 40-day walk, June and I were taking off for a cruise to Cuba. The theme that week was adventure, and we were on a cool adventure. It was just a really neat piece. A lot of our stuff on the blessing is on our website to, if you go to the Olathe Community of Christ website.

**Carla Long** 17:49

That’s helpful. That's what I was just going to ask could we look at some of this amazing stuff that you've already done? Why reinvent the wheel when you've done so much work on this already? Fantastic. So, what is the website? Address?

**Brad Johnson** 18:02

Ah, that's a that's a good question. I appreciate you asking that. Obviously, I'm stalling so I can click on it to see what it is. Oh, pretty obvious. Olathecofchrist.org.

**Carla Long** 18:18

Got it. Thank you. Sorry, I didn't mean to stump you during the podcast.

**Brad Johnson** 18:25

No, that’s okay. You know, under the “About”, one of the dropdowns under “About” is the congregational blessing. You click on that. We actually have the blessing. You can download the PDF, a picture of the front cover of the blessing companion. We don't actually publish that because it is very specific to us as a congregation, our blessing. There's a link to all the podcasts there. So, I'm sure your loyal podcast listeners are going to want to go on.

**Carla Long** 19:04

I'm really impressed by the amount of preparation that your congregation did in order to have this congregational blessing. So, you had the actual blessing in November 2018. You may have said this, and I missed it, but the service, was it was a worship service like on a Sunday morning, like a normal Sunday morning?

**Brad Johnson** 19:28

Yeah, it was on a Sunday morning and started at 10:25 which is the obvious time to start a worship service, we started that day with an early morning prayer service. The day for June and I started really early because we both woke up excited, like it was Christmas morning, and we were kids expecting Santa Claus. We got up early. Started drinking our coffee early. We pulled out our journals and shared different parts back and forth. I remember, we had our journals out and June said, hey, what did you fill in for this? There was one time when we were supposed to put in words a poem or a song or a hymn, something that inspired us. And June said, what did you put in for that we shared what we put in. We're both music people in real interested in lyrics. And so, we shared that. And then we started sharing other parts of the journal and just, we had probably two hours before it was time to go to the early morning, prayer service where we talked and shared about it. The prayer service was a time where each member of the congregation who attended and wanted could share what the preparation had been like for them and to offer prayers for the day for the congregation. It was a deep experience, probably as deep of an experience for me as the actual service where the blessing was offered. Between the prayer service and our main service, we had an opportunity with food.

**Carla Long** 21:21

Food is always important. No matter what!

**Brad Johnson** 21:26

We had a big meal afterwards which we had catered in from the Woods. And we had a couple of folks from one of the other congregations come in to help us with all that so that no one from our congregation would need to miss like is typical, getting food ready for after church. The 10:25 service was completely planned by the evangelists. Almost all the evangelists who participated in it and there were a couple of our other congregation members. Our choir sang. Each of the evangelists participated in different ways. They all offered a testimony of what they call the testimony of the journey, what it was like for them preparing the prayer, meeting us, and getting ready with us. They spent the Saturday before the blessing, that would have been the 17th, in worship and prayer at the Temple. They shared with each other what they had prepared for the blessing, what their thoughts were, and then they put that together. I believe it was Kris Judd who took it home that evening and cobbled it together into one coherent document. It was then shared that with us as sections were shared by different evangelists. It was a very powerful experience for us, the depth of it all. If you get a chance to, look at our blessing. As we prepared, we looked at other congregation blessings, always with the fact in mind that those are really designed for that congregation. It gave us a bit of an idea of what was there and what was ahead of us. And so, we're looking at ours. And if anyone looks, it is ours, not that we don't want to share it. We are sharing with you, but don't take that as your direction. Anyways, the Sunday service was a blessing on top of a blessing for us.

**Carla Long** 23:46

It sounds like it was an incredible experience. This is going to sound a little bit shallow compared to what you were talking about, but I have this saying. I'm the worship planner type person in our congregation and worship services that are meaningfully planned are meaningful. Not only did you meaningfully plan that worship service, but everything that went into it encouraged people to go deeper and deeper and deeper. The amount of preparation that happened beforehand is, I think, incredibly important for feeling that depth and understanding. I'm just really impressed with your congregation and the work that went into it.

**Brad Johnson** 24:26

It's very much the case of that you get out of something, what you put into it. I'm sure that there were members who, who didn't do much in advance and probably showed up the 18th and go, well, that didn't do much for me. But the ones who really invested themselves in it, I think found it to be a very meaningful experience. Now I should say we publish all our services as podcasts, so you can go into the past worship section of our website and scroll back and find that podcast, that whole service if anyone's ever interested in it. It's online to see if anyone wants to listen to it.

**Carla Long** 25:13

Oh, cool. That's really interesting. And so, of course, Olathecofchrist.org. That's where you can find that it. Right? This is June 2019. We're about eight months or so after your congregational blessing. Has there been anything different in your congregation after the blessing and the preparation you went through for that?

**Brad Johnson** 25:35

I don't know that I can say there's anything that's overwhelmingly different, but there's a lot of little things that are very encouraging. I feel like pointing us in a new direction, or a renewed direction. The blessing is becoming incorporated as part of our congregation in a few different ways. For one, almost every Sunday, somebody who is participating in the service references a portion of the blessing that is meaningful to them. We have an opportunity, whether it might be from the presider, or the person delivering the morning message, or the offertory, or whatever, to hear what they think about the blessing and what they're pulling out of it. That makes a little bit of a difference. We're also seeing some new and renewed activities in the congregation by different members. One of our members, who's a life coach, put on three or four evening sessions for us on some of the strengths and some of the tools that she has as a life coach and shared with all of us. We've got coming up in early fall, one of our members, a yoga instructor, or knows a lot about yoga, who is going to be doing some yoga classes. We've had other Sunday School offerings put out by members as a response to this. One of the couples in our congregation is now leading a reinstituted prayer services once a month, early Sunday morning. One of the couples is having a special activity for the kids who come that morning during the service time. These two things are new. Trying to think of anything else new. There are probably other things that I'm not thinking about. One thing that we saw in our blessing that we've instituted correlates to four kinds of major sections of it. We are called to be builders of fellowship. We're called to be builders of healing and reconciliation. We're called to be builders of community and builders of the Spirit.

We said let's divide those up into quarterly focuses. We took them in the order that they're in the blessing. The first quarter, we focused on being builders of fellowship in different ways, not only fellowship activities, and as part of many of the Sunday services, what we can do to improve on that as a congregation. The second quarter, which we are just getting close to the end of that right now, was healing and reconciliation. It is our focus and we’re doing a lot of things. And one of the final things we're doing, which I'm pretty excited about is a service, the last Sunday of the quarter, on healing and reconciliation. It's going to be a very meaningful piece. With those four things, we're also having weekly emails sent out under the signature of the pastor, but I think everyone who receives them and reads them knows that Allie Arnold, with her very gifted depth of spirituality has prepared those for us to send out. They're about healing and reconciliation and leading us in some pretty good directions. Those are what I see as the key things that have come out after it. It's something that we're still processing. We've had some of the evangelists back to speak. By the end of the year, we'll have all of them back at least once to the congregation to worship with us. It's pretty neat to be able to see them again because they really did become a strong part of our congregation for the year of preparation.

**Carla Long** 30:21

Of course. They sound like they became part of who you are. And I just love that. Well, gosh, Brad, this has been really informative and really helpful. I hope that it's encouraging to other congregations to do this. It sounds like it's been such an important experience for your congregation. The very fact that people reference that blessing back most Sundays is enough for me to say, yeah, that was definitely worth it.

**Brad Johnson** 30:49

Yeah, you know, we were in contact with a number of other congregations, kind of using their roadmap. One of the congregations was the Woods Chapel congregation. It was 10 years ago that they had their blessing. We've been told that it's still used on many Sunday services, that people will have a reference out of their blessing from 10 years ago. So, we're hoping that this blessing has that kind of life for us and kind of depth. When I look at it, it looks new every time. It's kind of like our own individualized portion of the Doctrine and Covenants.

**Carla Long** 31:30

Yeah. I just love that. God's speaking directly to you guys. I love that.

**Brad Johnson** 31:35

Yeah. It feels great.

**Carla Long** 31:41

Yeah, well, Brad, I hate to tell you, but I feel like God probably has a lot to say directly to you.

**Brad Johnson** 31:49

Because I'm not listening enough?

**Carla Long** 31:52

Probably not, but maybe that pound on the head. God's just trying to get your attention. Well, Brad, I am really grateful for you explaining all this stuff. Is there something else that you wanted to say about the congregational blessing that you didn't get to say already?

**Brad Johnson** 32:10

I probably won't think of that until after we have disconnected on this. So, I'm going to say as of this time, I probably said everything that I can think of. I hope you know I feel a lot of pressure on this. I was on one of the recent podcasts with a young man. I think he lives in Italy. He said that he listens to every one of the Project, Zion Podcasts. I'm just hoping that listening to this one doesn't break his spirit of listening to all of them and doesn't give up on the guests because you let me on here. So that's kind of my hope for today.

**Carla Long** 32:49

Oh, well, I hope that for you as well. And I thank you so much for sharing about that. Thank you so much for giving us some great tools at Olathecofchrist.org. Go check it out and see a little bit more about what you guys did and what's your blessing said. Thank you so much, Brad. Thank you.

**Josh Mangelson** 33:13

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