

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.

Brittany Mangelson 00:27

Hello, everyone, welcome to another episode of Project Zion Podcast. This is Brittany Mangelson. And I am going to be your host for today in another episode of our Chai Can't Even series where we talk about what it was like to grow up in Community of Christ with millennials millennial-ish in Community of Christ, and just hear their stories and hear their hopes for the future of Community of Christ. Today, we have an Erica Blevins Nye, and she is a member who lives in Michigan and we're just going to hear about her story and her hopes for the future of Community of Christ. So Erica, welcome. And why don't you just quickly introduce yourself? Give us a high level of however you would like to introduce yourself.

Erica Blevins Nye 01:17

Okay, Hi. Thanks for having me here, Brittany. Yeah, I'm Erica, and I currently live in Lake Orion, Michigan. I serve the church as a high priest. And I've served the church had a number of capacities over the years. And I guess we'll share about that today. I have three kids and a husband here. And that's the most high level of my life is I have three kids that I'm busy with them every day.

Brittany Mangelson 01:47

Well as fellow mom of three kids, I absolutely relate. Yeah, we actually just started like the pre recording chit chat talking about grocery shopping. So we are in full mom mode Erica and I. Oh, too funny. Okay, so let's just start at the beginning. Whatever the beginning looks like for you. I'm curious to know if you grew up Community of Christ. Did you attend camps? What was the temperature like of your church experience when you were growing up? Do, were you mentored as a child? Did you feel like you were a burden of your congregation? How was Campion just all of the things growing up Community of Christ.

Erica Blevins Nye 02:30

Okay, yeah, I have been Community of Christ, generations back on both sides of my family. And I grew up in a family that was very engaged in the church. In fact, our congregation, East Independence congregation was on my block. So often, we would walk to church. And, you know, I never really knew anything different than being friends with, going to school with playing in the neighborhood with church kids. I didn't occur to me that that could be any other than just one world as a kid. So church participation, for me growing up was just sort of a natural part of our family culture. My dad was a preset member, my mom became a priesthood member not long after women were ordained in our church. And so it just felt like part of my own story from the beginning. And that culture that I experienced at East Independence was just really powerful for kids. Especially, we had a huge active children's ministry, we put on plays, there was an elaborate Vacation Bible schools. They let me participate in the kids choir and the adult choir. I was just really active in the youth program, but also

just enveloped in a whole, diverse community there. And immersed in the spiritual life from the beginning. I remember as a kid watching very closely at prayer meetings, hearing people share their testimonies about how the Spirit was working in their life. And I was really curious how I could capture some of that. I guess, as a kid. God, magic is sort of how I felt about it. As a kid. I spent hours and hours in that church space. Just knowing every corner and closet of that church, because I spent so much time there. So I also kind of soaked up some of the ethic of Community of Christ, that has continued to shape why I stick around here and continue to shape what I feel like it's important parts of ministry, like the principal all are called everyone pitches in and does their share. It's a place where you're called to be brave and try new things. Because if everyone has to fit in, everyone's gonna have to try new things. Sometimes. I learned about being dependable and being creative with whatever task you're given in the church. There's 100 different ways that you can go about doing it and our church really made space for that a lot of creativity. My youth experience in the church. So that's when I was little. As a senior high aged kid, a older youth, I was also really active because I was in the independence area. So there was loads of youth ministry stuff available for those of us and there were so many of us. Well, I guess at the time, RLDS kids, so we did some youth ministries, one called harbor nights, where I was really taken under the wing of Paul Wilson, who was a youth minister there, and he worked with me to help lead that that youth ministry really encouraged me to help him plan and help lead that ministry, that was very formative for me. There was plenty of youth camps we went to, I don't, I don't recall going to a lot of senior high camps. But I remember being really busy with mission trips, civil rights, history trips, high adventure trips, all sorts of things like that with the youth groups. So I was really, really blessed to have 1000 different opportunities, with a whole lot of really talented and dedicated youth ministers to help kind of shape my spiritual formation and also really solidify that identity with Community of Christ for me. Plus, I was really blessed with lots of lots of peers, a lot of really great kids, who I was able to experience that with, I wasn't in some far flung place where there's just me and one other, you know, Senior High kid, there's lots of us there.

Brittany Mangelson 06:29

So I absolutely love hearing all of that, because so many times I think that religious communities can kind of see kids and youth is like an afterthought. And their main concern is the adults around. But one thing that I love about Community of Christ, and in a lot of the stories that we've told with folks who've grown up Community of Christ, as they really do feel like they were mentored and had leadership opportunities and ways to express their spirituality in very creative ways. As a kid, like, even you know, it's kind of funny when you were talking, when you said, Well, that, and then that was when I was a little kid, I was like, oh, yeah, I mean, all of that stuff was happening when you were a young child. And so I just think that that's such a unique thing about Community of Christ, that we really can allow our kids and our youth to take ownership and take part of shaping and forming the community. They're not necessarily just an afterthought, but they're, they're a very important part. And I also understand that that might not be everybody's perspective and experience. But I'm glad that it is yours. And that, that really molded and shaped your discipleship from from a really young age. So

Erica Blevins Nye 07:43

absolutely, it really did. There's so many people who played so many, many hours, and hard work into caring for these kids. You know, as a kid, you don't really notice or think too much about how much

work it really takes the adults to put all this stuff together. But now I look back. Wow, I'm so grateful for those people who took the time and cared enough to do that.

Brittany Mangelson 08:03

Yeah, absolutely. Okay, so let's progress in your story a little bit. One thing that I'm always interested to hear about is whether or not people who graduated high school and then became a young adults if they felt pressured to stay involved in church activities, or even date only those who were members of the church. And it's interesting, because a lot of the folks that I've interviewed didn't grow up in Independence. And so it's like, well, obviously not because there was me and you know, one other person, whatever, but where you were surrounded by so many Community of Christ people, and I also don't know if you went to Graceland or not. But how was that experience for you? Did you feel like there was the social pressure to continue to stay close to the church and have that still continue to be your social circle through college?

Erica Blevins Nye 08:56

Yeah, I didn't feel pressure. I had a natural desire to stay connected to the church, especially to some sort of faith formation. I think there was sort of this unsaid expectation that you probably should go to Graceland. If you grew up in the church my parents met at Graceland. My family in the moment I but that never felt quite right to me. Going to Graceland. I thought about that option, but also coming from Independence means that you'll go into college like Graceland already knowing a significant number of people. So if you want to start fresh without expectations of who you are and what you can do that Graceland isn't necessarily the right fit for everybody from independence and I think that's one thing I was looking for place I could kind of branch out on my own and and try out a new Erica that may not have already been pigeonholed so um I ended up going to what was then called Southwest Missouri State University, now Missouri State in Springfield, Missouri. And I went there to study theater, theater performance, creative writing, that kind of thing. And I don't know if you've ever been down to Springfield, but that is where the headquarters of these Assemblies of God church is. And the first thing I ran into, but I was actually moving into the dorms down there was the Assemblies of God campus ministry called Chi Alpha. And they were just this warm and welcoming group on campus, student ministry, and I was just taken in by that group from the beginning, I would have never seen a group of my peers who were so knowledgeable about the Bible, when we talked about the Bible and Community of Christ, but not in the way these people did. Right? They were so all about all in full life discipleship, that's what they talked about with Jesus, they always talked about how they're on fire for Jesus, which I never really had been real fan of that term. But I think it really summarizes what I saw in this group. And that was really exciting to me, to see people who felt like church was was their whole purpose for being where Jesus was their whole purpose for being. So I spent a lot of time with that campus ministry. I really took in a lot of their worship, I was really impressed by their, you know, their quality of worship, and their band, and all those neat things that they had, their full time minister was so knowledgeable, and I even looked up to the student peers, they're the peer leaders. I look back now they were 20. But I thought they were so wise and admired them so much. But this is, you know, a group where they focus a lot on apologetics. This is the time of learning about purity, culture, literal interpretation of the Bible. These sorts of things, at the small group meetings. And as I, as I continue with this group, I always sort of knew it wasn't quite a spiritual home for me. But there was lots I could learn there. And I wanted to continue to to learn whatever I could from this group. So at one point, I participated in their program for

developing peer leaders for small group leadership. And that was a really formative program. For me, they taught about small group dynamics about group prayer about basic Jesus, or for the purpose of apologetics. But I learned a lot from that experience. And when I came out of that I was prepared to be a small group leader for this youth program or young adult program. But before I could do that, the campus minister pulled me aside and said, you know, we have really appreciated your participation in Chi Alpha, we think it's, it's been fun to watch, you learn and absorb everything. We love the contributions, you've been able to make an obvious candidate, the leadership program, but we're sorry, we just don't think that it'd be appropriate for you to serve as a leader, because of the church background you're coming from. So unless you're willing to kind of let go of that, we can't have you as a full participating leader here. And I was really disappointed by that, to say the least, I think maybe in the back of my heart, I thought that might be the case. But it was the first time I had ever been just outright rejected, because of my connection to Community of Christ. And of course, I couldn't, I couldn't reject my spiritual home where I came from, you know. So it was at that point, when I saw there was limits to my participation in this other group, I at that point, was able to just kind of take what I learned about small group facilitation, about leadership, about the Bible, and hold on to those those good things, and then kind of just let the rest go. And I was able at that point to turn back my full attention toward Community of Christ. That was an interesting peek into the larger Christian culture where I was, I think that was a growth experience for me to see what else is out there. But it was also really reaffirming to me to say, you know, I tried that on for size, and it never quite fit right. And it was sort of uncomfortable and itchy. I need to go back to where I feel comfortable. And where there's, you know, actually a whole lot more room to grow in our church too. So all the while while I was participating in Assemblies of God ministry, I was still participating in Community of Christ. I would go there on Sundays at The Chapel for peace congregation in Springfield. And that congregation really was very welcome. I mean, for me, they made sure I was what I needed and felt comfortable at home encouraged me to participate in congregational life. There were a couple folks there, Ted and Sandra Tinsman, who were particularly dedicated to campus ministry. So they took the care of me and several other Community of Christ students and welcomed us into their lives. Even as they were starting their own family, their young kids are all grown now. And there was a young adult minister, Walt Morrison, who was in that area, I think he was a Transformation 2000 minister, who was really influential in my life, and helped me feel a sense of call. And, and about that time, in about 2000, maybe a little later, was my priesthood call to the office of priest. So another affirmation that there was a place for me to land in Community of Christ, a calling for me to serve. And the office of priest at that time was a really great fit for the college student family ministry, I guess you could say I was doing at that time in my life. That's what college looked like for me.

Brittany Mangelson 16:14

Thank you for sharing all of that. As soon as you said Assemblies of God, I thought, oh, there's probably going to be something...just because I know how Community of Christ is viewed by well, honestly, Christianity at large, or, like, there's a lot of confusion about who we are, right? And I think that, especially when you are looking at maybe a more literal interpretation of the Bible, and, you know, are you saved? Or are you not, you know, they might look at somebody, like a member of Community of Christ and think that we haven't accepted Jesus, you know, the "right way". And so, it's, I think it is sad when religion does that. And to be clear, right, like, US folks in the Restoration have a history of doing that as well. And but it is unfortunate, I think when when religion comes between real humans like

that, and like you were there willing to serve and willing to be involved and you know, because of the, I don't know, unique quirkiness of the Restoration that was used against you. So I am, I am sorry about that. But it does sound like it was, you know, a good growing experience. And for sure, a stark difference between just growing up in Independence, you know, down the road from your congregational building, but yeah, that's, that's really interesting, really interesting. So just continue your story. Um, so at this point in your story, you've been ordained a priest. So what did ministry look like? And I guess, kind of bridge that gap to where you are today?

17:56

Yeah, I continue to actually do a campus ministry and the next phase of my life. This phase like every other phase of my life, I think there's been no planning for, but it has been a great gift of opportunities to serve. I think it was 2002 World Conference in the spring. I'm bad with dates, but in the spring of 2002. I interviewed to do an internship at Journey House Campus Ministry. So that would be the summer after I graduated from college, and I got that internship. This is where I met a lot of the folks from Michigan, dirty house campus ministry is have you ever heard of that? is like the best kept secret of the last 20 years in the church?

Brittany Mangelson 18:41

Yeah, describe what it is because I actually have heard about it, but it's not talked about, like you said best kept secret.

Erica Blevins Nye 18:47

Yeah, yeah. dirty house campus ministry is a campus ministry program right next to Michigan State University in East Lansing, that offered ministry for all all college students in the area, not just those at Michigan State. It was begun when there was a handful of ministers in the East Lansing area who had been doing campus ministry, just in a smaller format, kind of a typical way of gathering with the students who had a dream of something more. They saw a beautiful historic home right next to campus that was for sale and saw the ministry opportunities inherent there and they bought the place, renovated it and put an addition on it and then call it the Campus Ministry Center is a place where students could live together could have activities and worship together. And it was the actual living sanctuary for a local congregation as well. So the house is this beautiful historic home on the first floor is a living room, there's a kitchen, there's office, the second floor is basically like dorm rooms for several college students. And then the third floor, it was, was just activity space for the students. So if you wanted a substance free, safe environment to live in this was this was your place to be. There's actually a congregation who met in the living room on Sunday nights. And this was the congregation who had dedicated themselves to campus ministry that was their really their main focus for being together. So they would worship there in the living room on Sunday evenings and invite any students who wanted to come. So they could just roll out of the rooms downstairs join the service in the living room. And they would base their service on a typical worship outline. But it was much more casual, we all sat in the living room, couch in a circle, you know, so you're singing together towards one another, the sermon was often very interactive, so people could share from wherever they sat in the room on the floor on the hearth, it was a space where students could kind of be exposed to what traditional, helpful worship format went look like, but also have a lot of space for interaction where they can learn and grow personally, spiritually, and get a lot of personal interaction with some of some very experienced

mentors and ministers there. So that was a really cool program. I joined in as the summer intern in 2002. And they continued on working there in a variety of capacities as a resident assistant, as a resident manager there for about five years. And that was a really powerful experience in what it means to be a Christ like community, right, because we're all living together, every good had to deal with all the stuff of living together, of diverse kinds of people living together, but not everyone there was Community of Christ or had to be. And so we would struggle through the challenges of community, but also really enjoy the deep blessings of community together. We had some powerful worship experiences. But we also had some really fun and hilarious fun activities together, we had plenty of opportunities to try out new kinds of ministries, under the mentorship of Diane McNeil, Richard Hawks, Ed Mers some of the leaders there. And it was, you know, a great time to be a priest. Because what better sort of ministry to the family then, than forming that sort of a close knit community together with with students, as this is inclusive, and as fun as possible. Partway through that time, I began to serve along with my friend, Adam booth ret, as a co-pastor of that small congregation that met there. And that was a great experience for me to begin to learn those sorts of congregational leadership skills, and, again, serve alongside those those other ministers. And hand in hand with that came in my another ordination to the office of Elder which, of course, was fitting as they began to, to offer that congregation leadership there. Part of what's really powerful about this experience to again, is the mentoring there were, you know, I was a just a summer intern, you know, early on, but since I was paid staff, they would all haul me along to the regional staff meetings, they would give me opportunities to travel around the state, with Richard Hawks for hours in the car, to be with congregations all over and treat me like just a peer and a peer minister, which was very formative.

Erica Blevins Nye 23:48

You know, I know a lot of young adults might say that, they were maybe given an opportunity to serve but not given a lot of direction. Or they might be given the opportunity to help out by setting up the chairs for the event. But for me, there were so many people who saw an opportunity to, to be a guide and a mentor and bring me along for the ministry and give me a job that really all I had to do to learn and grow was to briefly say yes, and give it my best. So this is a time where I was lots of mentoring in my life, and, and made lots of connections in Michigan are supposed to be there for one summer, and I'm still here. So I think it says something about the connections I made to the Church here, and the people up here.

Brittany Mangelson 24:39

I absolutely love hearing that part of your story, because it really shows how ministry is a communal thing, right? Like you were connected to other ministers to other people doing work, to provide support and really, like you said that family ministry to folks who, you know, may have been a way from their own family and like creating that tight knit community, but you weren't necessarily doing it on your own, like you for sure weren't doing it on your own. And so I feel like it's, it's less scary to, you know, kind of join something already in progress or to be, to have mentors who can walk you through what this looks like. And I think that sometimes, at least, I mean, I'm speaking for myself, I think sometimes I can overcomplicate ministry, but when I realized, like, oh, I have people all around me that know what they're doing, and I know what I'm doing and just collectively, we're just trying to live in community. Right? And, and it's so easy to overthink it and overcomplicate it when in reality, we just want connection with each other and connection with God. So I just I heard those, like that undercurrent

through through your sharing. So thank you. Thank you so much. Yeah. So you said you're still in Michigan. Oh, talk a little bit about that. When did your time Journey House? Correct? That's what it's called? When did your time with them wrap up?

Erica Blevins Nye 26:08

I think it was about 2007. Okay, I wrapped up there, I spent some time working for the Mission Center. Staff support there. As, as Michigan, Michigan Center began to take shape, its various forms. And about that time, also, I met my husband, I randomly met him at a coffee shop, and struck up a conversation. And a year and a half later, we were married, which, you know, was also a time for me to reconsider what that means for my ministry, you know, couldn't very well I think, be newly married and living in a house with a dozen college students. So so it's time to rethink that what that means. So, about the time I was married, I also began a new job for the church working as the Young Adult Ministries specialist at headquarters. But it just happened just as I was getting married, my husband had a job here in Michigan. So I suggested that I do this job remotely from Michigan, full time. And they agreed to do that. This is one of the first positions that was done full time remotely, before COVID for the church. So I did that for a number of years. That position for young adults ministry specialist, was intended to do all things young adult ministry related. So that would be offering gatherings and resources for Young Adult Ministries around the church, that's being a voice for young adult generations at church headquarters, and also helping young adults to stay connected to the church. So it's kind of a big, amorphous sort of support role for Young Adult Ministries. And I did that starting in about 2008. And about 2009, somewhere around there. I got an email from President Veazey with this idea. He said he really wants to hear from young adults themselves about how we're feeling about the future of the church, can I arrange a way for him to meet up with young adults? So this began, what we called Young Adult Vision Project. And what those meetings ended up looking like with vision project was gatherings of young adult groups around the church, across North America, Australia, Europe. And in each of these gatherings, young adults would come together and answer a series of questions. Sometimes a more formal conversation, other times more casual conversation. But each one of these, a member of the presidency was committed to being present to listen, which is a huge commitment from the First Presidency. And I'm still very grateful for their willingness to be at these gatherings because we had 32 of them with over 900 participants around the globe. So I traveled to many of those as well. And it was a really fascinating experience to see what Young Adult Ministries look like around the church to hear what their concerns are, what their experiences, and you know, Brittany, it's a lot like what you get to hear from the church, Chai Can't Even conversations, everyone has a different story, but there's some sort of connection point to the church and, and something that wants that some through line that wants to stay connected into the future. So we spend a lot of time talking about that. Also, along with that, we had two special focus retreats, where we would meet up with a handful of selected young adult leaders, sort of a diverse group from around the church to come into one location, have sort of a more focused conversation with the First Presidency and other leaders. In fact, I remember first time looking at each other at one of those retreats and saying, you know, I can't remember a time where all three of us, and I think the Presiding Bishopric and the President of the Council of 12, have all been together at the same event, at the same time, outside of staff gatherings, or headquarters, but they were willing to be in that place to hear the voices of young adults was very powerful. So that was, that was in about 2009 to 2011, those gatherings went on for Young Adult Vision Project.

Brittany Mangelson 30:46

So can I ask what kinds of things you were talking about and hearing what the stories I mean, what were young adults at that time concerned with? And do you think that there's parallels to what you would assume or that you've heard right now? Like, I'm just curious to know, like, what kinds of things the young adults were talking about?

Erica Blevins Nye 31:10

Yeah, absolutely. I think there are definitely still concerns that will match up with what you'll hear today, are we a lot of the same things you hear when you talk to young adults, on Project Zion. Because part of being a young adult is simply just your stage of life, you know, establishing a career, starting a family, finding a partner, maintaining that partnership, obviously a household all these things are, that's not gonna change from generation to generation, for the needs of a young adult, but also be and their stories are so diverse, depending on where you come from your history in the church. So it's really hard to pin down a common summary of of what everyone has in common, right? I'm sure you can say the same thing about what you hear from young adults also. But we did walk away with I think, something like eight areas for for follow up. And quite a few kind of general outline things that young adults were seeing everywhere. One of those was intergenerational relationships. I think sometimes young adults get a bad rap for wanting to only hang out with other young adults. But so many of them said, no, no, no, we want to spend time with the people in the congregation. And that's all different generations of people, we value, the wisdom and the companionship of older members of the congregation. If we didn't, we could choose any other church. But there's lots of people who look just like me, we stick around community Christ, because we want those relationships. So there was sort of a call for for all generations to to invest in those in the end to courageously befriend a young adult in congregational life. Hand in hand with that, they were looking for mentors, you've heard that theme all throughout what I've been saying, today, they're looking for people who will not just invest in a friendship, but in guidance for their own ministry, education. I think I'm assuming in the past, younger generations could kind of more learned by osmosis by watching their older ministers, and kind of be able to replicate with the older ministers doing it continuing on in the church life, right. But culture has changed, the church has changed so much, that simply replicating what we see older generations have done in the past, and congregational life, is not going to work for younger generations anymore. And so just watching and doing is not going to help, not necessarily having educational materials that's helpful about for offering good ministry. But really, you need something that's more nuanced, that's more reflective, and that comes from relationship with older ministers. So when we face new situations and new cultures and ministry, we can turn to older members who have experience and say, What is your experience, say to this? How do our principles that you've used in your ministry, speak to what I'm experiencing today, and help walk with me through this because it's, it's not cut and dry. It's not as clear as it used to be how to offer ministry in today's world, and in changing congregational life. So that will be the second one mentoring and relevant ministry education. And then another thing they ask for no surprise is gathering with other young adults with their peers. There are plenty of young adults we met in small locations where there's just a handful of them, who needed the encouragement of be connected with young adults from throughout the church, you know, virtually in person, whatever it takes to have a stronger sense of identity with a larger community, that you're not alone, that someone else has the same vision. You have, and it's holding fast those same principles that we have in this in this faith

community. So while they still value, the intergeneration, relationships, they still need the the the strengthening relationships of their own peers. And I think another key thing that came out a vision project was the word acceptance, we heard that almost everywhere we go, want to be accepted, we want some acceptance. And it took some digging to figure out what that meant. I think it mean meant a couple of things. First, I think young adults wanted to be accepted for the for who they were, whatever their lifestyle, whatever their identity, they could offer mystery without those things being restrictions to their offerings in the church.

Erica Blevins Nye 35:56

We heard a lot of people at that time suggesting that that ministry should not be restricted according to your sexual identity, or should not be restricted according to alcohol. Consumption, because that's a cultural thing. So acceptance of who I am, and the way I live my life. And ministry can happen in whatever context I am, I'm in that kind of acceptance. They also were asking for acceptance for offering ministry in their own way, and their own style. Because I think a lot of young adults feel pressure to offer ministry, the way people used to do it. And they say, that's not me, that's not my style, it's not my strength, can you accept what I have to offer who I am now, and it's not going to be perfect, and it will be growing just like all of us, but take what I'm willing to give you. And it's not going to necessarily fit in a mold, you might already have preconceived in your mind. So those are some of the things that were just general takeaways. I don't think any of that is rocket science, you know, it's nothing like wow, we never would have expected that from young adults! But I think it was helpful to hear that. I think part of what's helpful is to say this is this is the work of everybody to help meet these needs. This is congregational leaders. This is priesthood, non priesthood, this is church leaders, at every level, can find a way to deepen those relationships with young adults invest in them, and their leadership skills, and openly accept what younger generations have to offer, because who can speak to today's culture better than those who only know today's culture, and not the cultures of the past? So those are some some of our main things we heard. And I suspect that a lot of those kind of thing you'd hear today.

Brittany Mangelson 37:54

Yeah, absolutely. As you were talking, I realized the, I guess, fine balance, and that fine line of being nurtured and mentored and learning organically from folks who came before us, but then also not getting trapped in doing things exactly the same. And so, as I was connecting, in my mind, you know, your story of being really mentored, and taken under the wings of various ministers. And then also, side by side, hearing the concerns of young adults, it really is this balancing act of being able to learn from the past, and be rooted and grounded in our rich tradition, and how communities form and function and thrive. And then also being willing to, I don't know, let young adults spread their wings and try new things. And I think that that is a tension and a balance that has probably existed since the beginning of time, right? Quote, unquote, old folks had to be the young folks and their previous generations were probably, you know, like our kids these days like this. This is kind of, you know, the human experience. And it's not to say anything negative about what has been done before or anything like that, you know, and I even think, in our church history, you know, what would have Joseph Smith said about the direction that his son Joseph, the third took the reorganization, right? Like, there was probably there would have been some like our kids these days. And so this is this is a familiar story. And I think that it's for me in this moment, it's helpful to remember that that is a balancing act. This is part of being in community with one another and yet that understanding of that the one of the things that you said that

generational intergenerational relationships is really important in Community of Christ because again, we could all leave and go to some hipster mega church and be surrounded by RP. You're drinking our oat milk lattes or whatever, right? Like, that's not what we're choosing to do. We're choosing to sit with the big, you know, cup of coffee, the big pot of coffee around potluck with folks who are older than us, and who have these rich roots in our faith community. So that clearly I'm excited about this topic. It's, it's yeah, it's a familiar story. It's a familiar story.

Erica Blevins Nye 40:32

It is, it is. And our church is so I think uniquely poised to be able to, to nurture those relationships, right, that balancing act is not done by a program or some resource, it's just done in relationship with commitment to one another. And man, we have the perfect congregational culture to to encourage that if we just accept it as the gift that it is and really build on that strength. So if I can say anything to any, any older member of congregations, it's make a friend with young adults, you know, don't be scared. They're looking for that friendship. And they will respond to that. So be brave and make a new friend. Is that? Absolutely. Can I make one Asterix for the young adult vision project? Okay. I don't know if I need to say this for anyone else's sake. But at least for myself, I said it. I headed up this project, and I was one person. And I say that because that meant that I wrote all the questions that were posed to the young adults, they're all filtered through Erica's ideas and perspectives and biases, right. And then it was my job to take notes at all these meetings, bring back what I heard and consolidate it, find some find a summary, and synthesize all that. But all that, again, was then synthesized to Erica's one lens with all my individual weaknesses, blind spots, biases, all that. And I, you know, I want to give that caveat. For two reasons, I guess one to say, I'm aware that what we took from that experience, can be shaped by me. And I see my fingerprints all over that at work. But also, because I think there is something to be said for doing things collaboratively. I wasn't really truly able to do that with this project. But if there's one thing I could have done, it was build a young adult advisory team to head up projects like this one and others where we have a whole spectrum of perspectives of personal resources and connections we can draw on, of ideas that can come together. Because I think there's, there's, of course, so much strength in numbers and diversity. And this would have been good for that, too. So that's something I would love to see in the future is advisory teams, collaborative teams like this for Young Adult Ministries and all other types of ministries. We work better together in this church. Everything benefits from that. So there's my little caveat about that.

Brittany Mangelson 43:16

Well, thank you and I do I really like what you just said, we work better together in this church. And I think that, you know, obviously, our name is Community of Christ. And I think that with the undercurrent of our salvation is tied up in the salvation of another, collaboration, hearing stories, hearing the lived experience of how our theology and how our values is translated to our different cultures, I think that that's so important. So thank you for that. But I also think that, you know, it sounds like the work that you did was very meaningful and very important, so and has relevance today. So, absolutely. So let's move into today a little bit, I really have really appreciated your perspective on faith communities. And I wonder if you would expand a little bit more into today's world. So I guess bridge that gap between when you were working with young adults and then today and what do you personally see as the benefits of a faith community like what what keeps you around at this point in Community of Christ?

Erica Blevins Nye 44:27

I was in that position for Young Adult Ministries, until about 2011 When I wrapped up my Masters of Arts in Christian Ministries through the Community of Christ Seminary, and was and had my daughter in 2011. I worked from home with my daughter for about a year and then I stopped that job for the church in order to follow my next ministry calling as a parent full time and I've been a full time mom now for about 10 years, my daughter's 10. Now, since then we've had a son, and another son. So I have right now a 10 year old, seven year old and a five year old. And in that time, I have had the opportunity to serve as a pastor at my local congregation to serve our Michigan Mission Center President team for few years through COVID, which is a fascinating time to do that work. And then begin to develop some other ministries here in Michigan, like diversity team here, Naming Claiming and Acting the Change diversity team, build up the online small group, and help support ministry called Little Fish for our some of our youngest members online. And try my hand at my own little house church too, until COVID killed it. So it's been just serving in more low key ways, or part time ways in the church. And now I'm at a place where I've been a little bit disconnected from congregational life, because of COVID. And I'm no longer serving on the Mission Center President's team. So I don't have any specific ministry requirements right now. At this point, my kids have all started in school, my youngest started kindergarten this last month. So it's this odd period of calm in my life, where I have time to reflect on where God is calling me next. Where is the Spirit leading? And I don't have any specific answers for that. Maybe I'll do some writing. Maybe I'll help launch a new ministry. Maybe I'll just support local congregations who really need an extra hand. But I'm in a period of searching and discernment right now. And it's been nice to have that moment where I'm not just grinding out more and more stuff, more and more ministry work, I'm able to just stop and reflect for some time. So maybe you should interview me in a year, and then I'll be able to tell you what's going on right now. But right now, it's a question mark for the future for me. But I will, of course, be engaged here in the church.

Brittany Mangelson 47:16

Yeah, well, and I, I mean, I think you've deserved this. Like, a spot where you can stop and reflect and reconnect with God on your own terms without the responsibility of, you know, doing ministry in an official capacity for others, maybe this is the time you know, for you to take your, your Sabbath and to say, Okay, I'm gonna, you know, reset, restart. Take a little moment to pause with all of your kids at school, that's a good, good life transition. At least it was for me. But yeah, I think that, I definitely think that there are seasons for things. And I guess, it's exciting to me to think that, you know, you've got a clean slate, you could do a variety of things, and you're fully, fully in the driver's seat to see what that looks like. That's, that's exciting.

Erica Blevins Nye 48:15

It's exciting. And you know, being a parent is its own deep spiritual journey. There's so many things that you're you're faced with in yourself, and how the world works, themes, you know, that pervade our discipleship, like, like, sacrifice and grief, and hope, all those things, your own ego, all those things get stirred up and matured as a parent, but there's seems like there's not a lot of time to stop and reflect on what that means for your sense of call for what next steps look like for spiritual growth. I'm glad to have that opportunity to sort of to sort of process that and consider that as part of my journey, too.

Brittany Mangelson 48:55

Yeah, absolutely. And I think especially when you have little kids, and you're in the grind of just making sure that they stay alive, it can be difficult. And again, I'm speaking for myself, but it was difficult for me to try to sort out my beliefs and my values. And then suddenly, you realize, oh, I'm the one that needs to mentor and nurture and instill these values on my own children. And so you're, for me, I was kind of faced with, with all of those things really head on, because if I was, you know, lackadaisical about the idea of the worth of all persons, right, like I'm not, I'm not a good parent. I think that you're just kind of yeah, faced with your own discipleship in a very real way that you realize that you're passing this on to the next generation. So absolutely. And I think that that's something that maybe doesn't get talked about a lot because it's just, you know, like a given like, oh, you take your kids to church and whatever. But yeah, it's there's a lot to it. So absolutely.

Erica Blevins Nye 50:02

Absolutely.

Brittany Mangelson 50:04

So what would you say then are some of the concerns or challenges of being a member of Community of Christ right now, like, particularly in our in our age, bracket?

Erica Blevins Nye 50:19

Yeah, I think you're, you're talking about shaping our children's faith formation, I think that's a real challenge, I can totally relate. Right now, congregations are, you know, a lot of them are just trying to get by and offer much ministry directly to little people. It's really hard for, of course, a number of reasons we all are familiar with. And I don't see a plan for how we intend to teach our youngest little lives into the future as the church changes, right. As congregational life shapes, changes, you know, we've considered the ways that might impact the connections to adults, adults are learning and connecting in new and new ways. But, you know, in 20 years, our kids will not have any sort of understanding of all these beautiful principles and basic beliefs and identity, and culture and ethos at this church, unless we find some way to specifically teach that to them in new ways. In a new world, I don't feel like I'm articulating this very well. But I feel like we need a plan, I guess, for how we could connect with children. Because what we're doing right now is, is not going to be enough to teach his whole world of faith formation that they need. And we rely very heavily on parents to do that work ourselves. And we know has to be done in community. I don't know what the answers are for that. But I think we need to consider what our plan is. Does that look like? Building out a smorgasbord of youth summer camps that teach kids about the principles of this faith community? Does that look like setting up community family clubs in a variety of communities that that are branded and connected across the church? So people have a sense of shared identity, but can can touch the lives of children outside of the context of Sunday morning? Is that finding ways to connect young people on social media? Is that a Community Christ boarding school, to raise kids in a community with a community Christ, ethos and principles? I don't know. But I think it's time to start thinking about what is our plan, not for the next 10 years, but for, you know, the next 20 years of that from the beginning of life, up to those first 18 years of a child's formation? Maybe there's something to looking at the ways that other minority cultures have tried to build an intergenerational sense of identity in a bigger context? I don't know. But it's something to think about. And maybe this is the kind of thing that young adults themselves can pull together and

collaborate on? How can we form a sense of identity for our children, when identity is probably not going to be based in traditional congregational life format anymore. There's one concern I have.

Brittany Mangelson 53:36

So you are speaking my language. This is something you know, in my context of ministry, I work a lot with adults who are going through faith transitions, who are finding Community of Christ, but they, by and large, bring a lot of kids with them. And you know, in my congregation, sometimes it's my kids that are the only ones that show up and then we've had Sundays before, where there's been 30 kids, and the reality that we need to be better prepared to figure out how to instill discipleship to the younger generation, and all of these things that I'm hearing you say that were part of your childhood, you know, how do we bring some of that back? And how do we help like, my congregation? How do we help my congregation last longer than just one more generation? Right? And, and this is something that I'm like, Ah, there's so much potential here. And the values are, that the values that Community of Christ has are so universal, and they're so applicable to the spiritual but not religious crowd. And I've been saying for a long time, like we need to figure out a way to make our message more accessible to younger folks who, like you said are maybe not necessarily getting that discipleship formation in, like, as easily as they were in the past. And there's just so many distractions nowadays. And, you know, the breakdown of community in general is something that I'm very concerned about. And so yes, you are speaking my language.

Erica Blevins Nye 55:21

It's true that I think there's a lot of hope potential there. But we're gonna have to put a lot of potential creativity towards how we can create something new. But it can be really cool. It can be really beautiful, Brittany, I think there's, there's so much potential.

Brittany Mangelson 55:37

Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, my next question was going to be how do we help empower the youth to step into those leadership roles? And then, you know, kind of a nod to technology? And how do we utilize that? And I think that you have shared some of those answers, right, like, connecting people in the church on the internet, having a support group that's, you know, branded, and maybe like a camping experience that could be utilized across the board support groups, for parents and kids. But are there any other ideas of how you think that maybe we could better utilize technology to maybe empower those current youth?

Erica Blevins Nye 56:21

I don't know if I have any genius, technology ideas. I think technology can be used for us to build a strong sense of identity across a wide geography, right. And I think that more and more, that's going to be a need for our generation, and those younger than us, right, there'll be a handful of us here, a handful of us here, who speak this language of Community of Christ. And we're going to need to find a way to have other people who we can converse with, who speak that language and who can we can find encouragement and support from and technology can be that mode that we we connect with. And you'll see that already taking shape in some areas of the church. But I think there's other ways we can, we can invest in building that sense of identity, when there's not going to be local congregations in a traditional format that help us make those identity connections. And one might be gathering young

generations to a central location, you know, just meeting in person, or meeting online, to collaborate about the future of the church. I think part of our struggle is we're trying to use this, this institutional format that worked for 150 years, but now it's just not quite the right format for today's culture. And trying to use that format to make space for a future that's different that doesn't fit that. And maybe it would be helpful to bring together younger generations, outside of the context of those structures, and the rules that they follow, to begin to talk about what resources they do have to build a future together, what ideas they can do together, because man, the younger generations, these Gen Xers these millennials, bring so much incredible resource that can bring so much blessing to the church and their communities. professional experience, because so many of our leaders now have professional experience, not just being an appointee from age 22 on, but in a professional realms, all all sorts of sectors that they could bring to bear to support the work of the church. And they have in our diversity of location can be a great benefit. If we are able to just come together and dream things up together and have a little bit of flexibility to launch those things without necessarily some institutional stamp on it, or approval or red tape, just to kind of dream big and build something organically. And then from there, once you have that, that sort of general shape, then then then let it take shape and blossom and grow into whatever the future the church might be. I think there is something to bringing together all those minds and hearts from around the church to to build encouragement for one another, but also to kind of just dream big together and go for it. Hope that makes sense.

Brittany Mangelson 59:38

Yes. And what I heard in that message is that we need to let the Spirit breathe, right? Yes, maybe get out of our own way. And, you know, I heard you talk about red tape and things like that. And I think that, again, sometimes we can overcomplicate things and we can overthink things and yet when we remember that we are better at church when we are in community. And when we listen to one another and just go where God is calling us that, like maybe the answer is that simple, scary, and also complicated. But maybe

Erica Blevins Nye 1:00:15

Maybe not simple.

Brittany Mangelson 1:00:17

maybe maybe it just takes listening to each other and just figuring out how to express our values in a way that makes sense in today's world. So yeah, sounds simple. But actually it's very complicated, yeah.

Erica Blevins Nye 1:00:32

It's not necessarily a solution. But it might be a starting place.

Brittany Mangelson 1:00:35

Yeah, an open door and a viable path together, if we just remember to hold on to one another, and to listen to our experiences and our creative ideas. I really like what you said about Gen Z, and how they are so creative. And they are starting to, you know, be in the professional world themselves. And what the quote unquote job market looks like for them is very different than even, you know, our generation and for sure, the generation generations ahead of them. So how do we utilize that creativity to create a

more sustainable model of what church can be? So? Yeah, I like I like all of those, all of those suggestions.

Erica Blevins Nye 1:01:24

Absolutely. that creativity is such an important and undervalued part of Community of Christ culture. For as long as I remember, you know, we say, here's our, here's what we're a bid for someone find a creative solution to do that. And people will come up with the most clever and creative resourceful ways of creating a resource or putting out to the world worship, or making a children's museum, or putting together a worship center. And it's sort of just baked into Community of Christ to come up with creative solutions, and to come at things from new angles. And to make things beautiful, even with that sort of artistic creativity. I think other denominations, when they, when they meet us, are often struck by how we approach things with fresh creativity all the time. And that's one of our great strengths. I hope we can find ways to continue to use that as we build into the future.

Brittany Mangelson 1:02:16

Yeah, absolutely. So I guess with that, I usually like to, towards the end of these interviews, just ask what are your hopes for Community of Christ? I think that you have talked about a lot of those hopes. But do you have, do you have any other hopes for Community of Christ as we move into the future together?

Erica Blevins Nye 1:02:37

I hope that whatever the church looks like, we can find a way to speak the language together, that there always be in some way that there will always be a way for us to somehow connect to someone else who has a passion for our principles for the message and mission of Jesus as we understand it, and can support one another in living that out whatever diverse circumstances we find ourselves in, and if we can continue to have some connection to support one another in that and stay grounded in those beautiful beliefs that we hold, that are just really write on and write on time. I think their future for Community of Christ can be beautiful, and really relevant to the world today. So that's my hope, we can just continue to find a way to speak this language together, then we can pass it on to our children to.

Brittany Mangelson 1:03:39

That's my hope as well, amen! It's really, really beautiful. And I think that we can do it, I think that it's a I think that it's a hope. And a goal that is is achievable. Again, if we stick together and take risks, and boldly go where God is calling us to go. So thank you so much, Erica. This, this conversation has been really exciting for me. And I just appreciate all the things that you've shared. And I always like to kind of wrap up is, is there anything else that I didn't ask you or you weren't able to share any last thoughts? Before we say goodbye?

Erica Blevins Nye 1:04:17

Pretty, I appreciate you, offering the opportunity for me to think back about my story, especially as I consider where God might be leading me next, it's been really meaningful to look at where I've been noticed the Holy Spirit has had a through line through the whole thing. And there's no reason to think that's gonna stop now. So, and I appreciate that you are one of those people who help us also to

connect together and speak that language together. So I'm glad you're part of the story too. So thank you.

Brittany Mangelson 1:04:50

Well, thank you. And I mean, I know we don't really know each other that well other than the internet, but it has been fun getting to know a fellow mom have three young kids. Just hearing more about your story and figuring out how my own discipleship can be, again, part of part of this greater story and the story that's, like you said, has been going on for 150 plus years and recognizing that the ways that we adapt and change are part of the larger story and are what is going to continue. Continue the story through the generations to come. So I really appreciate your hope and your perspective, and you sharing your experiences. So thank you so much.

Erica Blevins Nye 1:05:34

Yes, you're welcome. Thank you.

Josh Mangelson 1:05:44

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