

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 00:35

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long and today you're listening to What's Brewing. It's a series about ministries that are taking place all over the world for Community of Christ. And today we're going to be talking about Community Circle. And I'm going to let my guests tell you all about what that is. But before they get to do that, I would like to introduce you to Michael Wright and Gail Shurtleff. Hi, Michael. Hi, Gail.

Michael Wright 01:00

Hey, Carla.

Gail Shurtleff 01:02

Hey!

Carla Long 01:02

Oh, there you are, Gail. It's so good to have you both here. And before we jump into Community Circle, Gail, why don't you go first, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Gail Shurtleff 01:13

Well, I'm Gail Shurtleff. I've been a member of Community of Christ since September of 2018. I live in the Netherlands. I've been in here in Europe for 20 years. I'm a licensed therapist on the continent here in Europe, and in the US, as well. And I'm just finishing up a spiritual direction program that I will receive my certificate for in December.

Carla Long 01:47

Oh, wow. That is so cool. Gail, you that is so cool. A licensed therapist on two continents, and you're finishing up your certificate. That's very, very awesome. Michael, your turn, tell us about yourself.

Michael Wright 02:01

Well, hello, everybody. My name is Michael Wright and I reside in Rome, Italy. This has been my home for the last two decades. Actually, next week will be my 22nd year of living in, in Italy. So I live here with my husband, Antonio, who is a true Roman. In my career life. I'm the director of European programs for Duquesne University, their home campus is in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but I run their two international campuses for study abroad in Ireland and Italy. And their two summer campuses in Ghana and Tanzania. And I teach in the Roman program as well. I've been a member of Community of Christ and Community Circle since March of 2019. So Gail's got me beat by half a year. And, and she was a lovely, influential person in my journey, as well. And I came from the LDS tradition, which I know many of your listeners are here. And I am just getting ready to finish up my my seminary degree in the

Community of Christ Seminary in December. So lots of lovely things happening and really great to be here with you.

Carla Long 03:19

You two are both extraordinarily busy people. I am just astounded by how much you get done and what you're doing in your lives. It's just amazing. And I'm so so happy that I know you and I get to call you friends. So let's jump into it. Um, how did Community Circle get started? And maybe just a little bit tell us what Community Circle is? Because I don't even know if everybody knows. So how did Community Circle get started? And what is it?

03:49

Well, Community Circle is Community of Christ's first officially recognized online congregation. We take up two mission centers, British Isles and Western Europe mission centers. So we kind of have a nice little geographic area. How did they get started? You know, within Community of Christ, all good things start around a table and Community Circle was no different. You'll know the names Elray Henrickson, Rand Irons, Andrew Bolton, Apostle Richard James, those four people really had a lot of well guidance for us. What happened was that Elray had tried to make a go of an online ministry about a year or two before Circle actually was formed. And then that didn't quite work out. And while Elray and Rand were at Bolton's sitting around the table, I should say that first off, Rand had approached Richard James and Rand and Richard, he thought, well, what can we do? Because Rand was wanting to do something. And they decided that maybe the route was an online ministry. And around a table, they formed the idea, Rand, Elray, and Andrew, of doing Circle. And the first meeting was, I think the date it was a Sunday, I think it was November 4, or fifth, I can't be absolutely sure. 2017 There were several people there. It was very, very, very small. A guy by the name of Ken, myself. Rand. There were a few others that I won't, I can't, right off the top of my, my head. And Richard was there for support as well. So we started meeting, I had actually come into the meeting, because I had met with Joey independently, Joey Williams, just about two weeks before, in a Starbucks in the Utrecht train station here in the Netherlands. And he said, Well, what do you think about trying an online service. And I thought I don't know, Church Online, but I went, and I have not missed too many meetings since. So, you know, that's how it started.

Carla Long 07:12

So it sounded like it had a really organic start. There's people who wanted to get happening, and it just ended up happening.

Gail Shurtleff 07:19

Yep.

Carla Long 07:21

Awesome. So how many people attend and how many countries are represented?

Michael Wright 07:26

It's kind of funny that Gail says, "Church online" question mark, question mark question mark, because that's exactly what happened to me, too. I had had these two experiences with Community of Christ,

when I had just started to seek and I was on business in the United States, I went to a congregation in Pittsburgh to make sure that Community of Christ, well, let's just say it this way, that they weren't crazy. And I went, and I loved the congregation, very much. You know, it was just to go out and check out what I was, what I was hoping was true. And it was really, really true. It was lovely. And then went to Houston on another business trip. And I was like, okay, these people are the people I want to be with. So I came back to Europe and was put back in touch with, with Richard James, our apostle, and with Rand who Gail was talking about, and they had said that they were starting something that was online. And I also had never ever thought that that was possible, like church online. What's that, like? You know, and it ended up being a lovely, lovely place to land. We're a small, emerging congregation, I guess that's part of the word emerging, we probably wouldn't have 250 members if we were emerging. And it kind of reminds me in the Doctrine and Covenants in Section 163, when there's the verse in 8b that says, "Do not be unduly concerned with numbers, be fervent in your witness passionate and your discipleship and vigorous in your labor. And on behalf of peace and justice, were two or three such disciples form community. There the Spirit will be and many will come to see." And so that's kind of our real hope. Right? In the moment, we have maybe between 8-12 people that come on a Sunday, and they come from all over Europe. Once again, we're kind of formed to be a place for people that don't have a church community close to them, or one where they, they they feel comfortable. We want to be... so we kind of expand all geography, as you heard, not too many congregations expand beyond two mission centers. So we have people that join us from the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Wales in the United Kingdom, Sweden, and some a couple of other places too. And we actually even have a couple of members of the congregation. people that attend with us from the United States as well who have come to know us. So this is one of the great things about being an online community is that there's really not too many borders and there's not too many walls. So we're kind of using that innovation to, to learn how to be community in this format. We have some members that are lifelong Community of Christ members. And then I'd say the other half of the people that really come to us are who are members and seekers have come from some sort of connection with the LDS church, either they were seekers there, or they were members, like myself, and have come and found us in that way.

Carla Long 10:37

It sounds like a wonderful group, it sounds like a really close knit group, which I always appreciate, which I really, really love. And and I think that's probably, that probably helps. Because you can't be in person, it probably helps that, you know, you look forward to seeing your friends and getting to talk to your friends. I really like that a lot. So when you get together, what is a typical service like?

Gail Shurtleff 11:03

Oh, wow. You know, we can innovate. And it's kind of fun doing it. You know, as far as a program, we use PowerPoints, we use Canva to design things. We gather as a group, we will have a chat, before the service starts about 15 minutes before we open up the Zoom Room. And we just start chatting. And one of our challenges is we are multi lingual as far as languages that are spoken. So we need to make room for that because we have some Italians that attend that don't speak English. So we give room for that. So we might do slides in both English and the other languages that are represented for that service. We, we really, we, I don't know we have fun with it. It's a regular service. If you can call anything regular. We might have a spiritual practice, we might have Lectio Divina or Visio Divina or a sermon, it just depends on who is organizing and what they want, and where they feel the Spirit is

breathing on them, to move them into preparing this service. Another fun thing that we do with our services is that we have seekers that really want to learn how to prepare a service. And so we're free to walk with the seeker. I'm actually working on right now, which will be our September communion service, working with the seeker on it. And I'll be on holiday in Wales for this service. So we're going to actually come live from a home in Wales, where we will run the communion service. And we just are free to explore. We can communicate, we can use Zoom rooms, breakout rooms, any number of options apply here. And I will have to say that Michael does mind blowing slides on Canva totally amazing artistic talent. None of us try to even duplicate it, because, we know we can't. So we just have fun, we're creative. And whatever the Spirit brings that day is what we do.

Carla Long 14:14

That sounds pretty wonderful. I love it when congregations are open to where the Spirit leads. I know like, not so much for me for zoom church but or church online, but church in person. Like it always felt really good when someone would walk in and they needed something different than what we had been prepared. And so you can set what you prepared aside and truly be in the presence be present and be in the moment. I think that's super important. I also remember when I was working in Europe, how much time and effort it takes when there's it's multilingual. It's that is a very difficult challenge. And it's not a challenge that can't be overcome. It certainly can. But everyone has to be mindful of that. And it's really important to make sure people don't feel less than because they don't speak a certain language or so on and so forth. So it's it's a, it is something that is tricky that you really have to work your way through. So I'm so grateful that you do that. Let's see. Um, so what are some wonderful moments that have happened during community circle? Can we can we hear about some really positive moments?

Michael Wright 15:27

Absolutely, absolutely. We, we both came up with some, so we're both going to share. But you know, one of the things that's really cool with with this little emerging community is that with the with the onset of the pandemic, we were really set up. I mean, we were already doing things online. We were, we were, we were ready, really ready to be able to help out. In fact, my colleague and sister here online with me, Gail, I want to dote on her. She, she started helping people throughout the global church to be able to help teach them how to do zoom and get online, she provided a beautiful ministry to people around the world. And that was just coming from our little community here in Western Europe, and the sacraments in their online format, too. I know that Gail is going to talk about one, but I'm going to talk about another one. And that was seeing people take advantage of them. And especially baptism, one of the really cool things is that our congregation continues to grow and actually have baptisms, which is really lovely. We've already had to this year and this fall, we have another baptism, that will be happening, as well. So those are fantastic to be able to witness and be part of online. My own baptism happened in Community Circle. And I'll never forget that experience and having apostle Richard James come to Rome to physically give that sacrament and be part of that with me. I was able to get the Zoom setup and my brothers and sisters and Community Circle and people from the global church and my family, everyone could could could link in and be part of that really special experience for me. And then also, just one other that comes to mind, especially when you're talking about multi lingual challenges and excitement and testing the waters with it, is that we actually hosted the first service for Sacred Pause in Europe with Harmony for the LGBTQIA+ community. And as...after, I think it was the end of 2019, after the Mission Center conference happened that helped to affirm LGBTQIA marriage and

priesthood in Europe for many of our countries. We held a big online celebration with Harmony. It was multilingual multimedia worship festivity. It was amazing. And it happened in English, Spanish, French, Italian, German, and Dutch simultaneously together. It was amazing. And it was just so exciting. We were wiping away tears, and cheering all in the same moment for that special moment for the church in Europe. So those are two that come to mind for me.

Gail Shurtleff 18:28

Okay, I'm going to try this and do this without crying, but I probably will make it. One of the biggest things that we couldn't do in the beginning, was to celebrate Communion of the Lord's Supper. And I'm gonna lose it? Um, we went to World Conference, I went as a delegate in 2019. And that was on the I was on the discussion. And I spoke to it in a smaller workshop. Not on the delegate floor, but it was something that a lot of people didn't understand is why would you want or need this? I mean, communion is one of the most sacred things we can engage in. And for some people, especially who are LDS, LDS seekers who come from that faith. When we are told that we're not worthy to take those emblems of bread and water or juice. It does something to your soul. And so when we were online, and the first Sunday would roll around, we couldn't do it. And then it came down at that first weekend in September. That Sunday was the first time that we, as an online group could engage in communion. And something marvelous happened that day. We all gathered. Unfortunately, Michael wasn't there at the time. I'll tell you about that in a moment. But Michael was there to participate. One of the songs that was sung, and we each took a verse to sing it. Because you can't sing as a group on, on Zoom, you have to only one person can sing at a time. (singing) "For everyone b save born, a place at the table." You get the rest of it. We went around the group. And Claire and Richard James took the verse where it talks about the couple. I took the verse where it talks about the older with the younger person in hand. This song, I've spoke about it before, this was the reason I knew Community of Christ would accept me as a disabled woman. I knew there was a place at the table for me. After we sang that song, after we went through the process of the invitation, the scripture. The emblems were blessed, and we partook. And the joy of that moment, that wonderment of that moment, I'll never forget it. It was so powerful. And we realized at the end of the service that Michael had missed out on this. And we wanted Michael, to participate in what we'd been in, what we'd had. And I was sitting at my computer here on, it was a Thursday, I believe, I was not doing much—well I was working—I was doing much. I'm all of a sudden, my messenger popped up and it was Richard, "Gail, can you be here in 30 minutes, I'm going to put together an online communion service for Michael so that he can experience this." And we did. And it was so amazing. And within the next day or two, there were some people who were sick, who needed a sacrament of administration and laying on of hands. And once again, instantly, we gathered in support for those who needed prayer and blessing. It—those two events were probably—well three, really, those were probably the most powerful events, other than the baptisms, that happened. You just, it's amazing what gets transmitted somehow through a zoom screen, you would not think it could happen until you experience it. It's so powerful.

Carla Long 24:22

All of those experiences just sound incredibly wonderful and just sound so meaningful. And I just love how the Holy Spirit can work, even through technology, even through 1000s and 1000s of miles apart. I loved hearing both all of those stories. Thank you.

Michael Wright 24:39

Can I just add something to that just because it brought back those memories and they're alive in my mind. I just remember for like a year plus that community circle was around not a congregation yet before. This was possible. We were there were lots of times I remember that we were practicing with prayer, and kind of offering up the inability to have the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a fast, so this kind of spiritual practice of, of waiting, we knew it would come some time, but we just didn't know when and, and when we would have that blessing so and also the sacrament in that format to that someone would call me up just a couple of days after everyone was able to have it and was telling me about it. And that we could just do it again. I just loved the spontaneity with that. And my community loved me enough to just reach out and say, Hey, Michael, do you want to do that? And I was like, Yes, I want to do that. And people came together, once again to do that. So I just remember that being such a beautiful blessing.

Carla Long 25:49

That is beautiful. And thank you for bringing up the spiritual practice of waiting, because that one's the one I'm 100% The worst that the worst at waiting. That's, that's a really, that kind of puts it in a whole different perspective. And so it's a can be a really beautiful perspective. Thanks for saying that. So we've heard about some really amazing moments in Community Circle. Have there been some difficult moments in Community Circle as well.

Michael Wright 26:15

There are difficult moments in any community and any organization. But one of the things that I think is difficult for all of us is, it is, is really a blessing in another sense, the blessing that we keep talking about the geography doesn't bind us, You know, we're able to be in two mission centers be in multiple nations of the world. But geography also is a giant challenge to us. I mean, I love Gail, and we talk all the time. And when Gail has a challenge in, in her city in the Netherlands, or I am upset, depressed and need somebody in Rome, it would involve an international airplane ticket, time, a long train, a long car, maybe all three for us to get together. And so the physical inability to be together is also a challenge for us in this new format of church. And, you know, during the pandemic, maybe it was a little less apparent, because no one could go anywhere. So we were really lucky to be able to come together in in our online format and on the Zoom. But that's kind of where it currently remains for us, you know, we can FaceTime each other, we can zoom each other, we can send a WhatsApp message, but it's really hard for us to get together. So I think that's one of the big challenges moving forward in this small emerging congregation is that we'll have to find ways for us to be able to get together in person. And how we can extend that because there, there is an essential part of the physicality of community too. And so we have to experiment with that. And that's not only just to have potluck, hang out, hug each other, which we miss, and we wish we could do. But in our own exploration of who we are, as a church, a global church and as a, as a community and as a congregation, our, our faith in the moments of worship together are supposed to propel us into action. And it's hard to act when we can't come together. So what does action look like when you live in a whole bunch of different places? I think the possibilities are exciting of what can emerge from it, and that it will require innovation on our part. But we've already proven that we are innovative, innovative, because we've been able to put this together and work through this. But there's still lots to discern and lots of different possibilities for us moving forward. How cool would it be that each of us is making a difference in our own city in ten different cities

in Europe? That's cool to think about. But how do you make that be effective in in putting Jesus's call to action into place? So I think that that's maybe for me, one of the most difficult parts of our community is that it's not easy for us to get together, even though we're together online quite often.

Carla Long 29:25

Yeah, that would be...

Gail Shurtleff 29:26

I've got to second what Michael just said.

Carla Long 29:28

Okay, go ahead, Gail.

Carla Long 29:30

I've got to second what Michael just said. I mean, the distance factor is one of our hardest challenges. I often converse with one of our members and how I would love to get on a plane sometimes, and just go up and give her a hug. And all I can do is reach through the internet and let her know, that I'm here, I'm listening. I can't do any, you know, I can't go up and reach out to you. But it is a challenge. And we're having to come up with very creative ways of dealing with it.

Carla Long 30:19

So all of you, listeners who are hearing this, who have in person congregations, make sure you go and hug your people, and make sure that you are enjoying being with your people, that's really important. And thank you for talking about those difficult moments in Community Circle, because, of course, that would be one that... Our name is Community of Christ. And for us community is a whole bunch of different ways. It's online, it's in person, and so on and so forth. But it is pretty nice to be able to hug each other and each other's food and, you know, be in the presence of each other. So thank you for bringing that up. That's an important part of this. You alluded a little bit to some ministries that you're developing, perhaps. And so let's talk a little bit about that. What ministries have you developed it developed? And who are they for? What are these ministries?

Gail Shurtleff 31:15

Well, we've got several, I'll take some and Michael will take some as well. And two of the ones that are running. One is called Living Spiritual Practices. It's something that Evangelist Mike Botts, and I run on the first Wednesday of the month. And it focuses on what we call Pocket Practices. These are spiritual practices that we can get down to 10 minutes that you can take out anywhere, do anyplace I can do it sitting on the train, I could do it sitting on the plane, yes, I'm going to do green eggs and ham here. I can do it when I wake up in the morning. The rule is that the practice has to be 10 minutes or less and it has to be pocketable, meaning you have to be able to whip out your your iPhone or your iPad, you have to be able to be mobile with it. And we run some amazing practices. The one that we use to open it with is called The Nut that God Gave Us, and is actually an inclusive practice that entails using your eyes, ears, tactile. My brain is going here, what are the five senses. We're talking about the five senses here. And you take a nut and you are going to feel the nut and experience it on multiple levels. And eventually you eat the nut. But in the experience of eating the nut, you're also combining all those other

senses together. The reason why I designed it was because I wanted something that was inclusive. I wanted something that a deaf person, a blind person, a person with other disabilities could feel equal in. It can also be done with another food if somebody is allergic to one nut. So we run this once a month. We have guest ministers, Mike Botts and I do a lot. We do a lot of original practices here, we create, but we've had multiple people from Community of Christ come in to present practices. And it's been an amazing process. Janne' Grover came in and did a practice around music. Ron Harmon came in and did a practice with a hymn, Charmaine Chvala-Smith came in and did a practice that enabled us to get back to sleep when we wake up in the middle of the night. That was rather useful. I can say, um, let's see. We've had other right off the top of my head we've had other people come in as well. Kris Judd came in. Katie Harmon McLaughlin came in. So we've had a variety of different people with different backgrounds coming in offering up the spiritual practices. They are all Pocket Practices. We also have another ministry called Mourning the Tradition, which is... while LSP is open to anyone on either side of the pond, we do it Wednesdays at 8:00 European Time. Mourning the Tradition is a listening ministry. Most recently, we offered ministry to those who were struggling with Under the Banner (Under the Banner of Heaven TV series 2022), and we had listening sessions for those who dealt with that. We also will do have listening centers or a listening session around the LDS General Conference that will be coming up in October. I'm just about to schedule that one.

Gail Shurtleff 36:19

We go in and we listen to people's stories. We allow them just to talk to express their feelings around their faith journeys, their process of going through things. We don't try to talk, it takes somewhat of a spiritual direction format, but it's not spiritual direction. This is for people anywhere who have an LDS Seeker background and who want to come, feel a need to tell their stories. I'm also working on hatching something that will come out in the future. But just know that that Circle is going to spring something else for another needed population of people who need some ministry. So that will be announced when I get some legal advice on the situation.

Carla Long 37:27

Well, those sounds

Gail Shurtleff 37:27

I'm excited about it.

Carla Long 37:29

Yeah, they sound really, really wonderful, like some really good stuff happening. Thanks! Michael, what about you?

Michael Wright 37:35

I was going to just tell you briefly about two other ministries that we've had developed. One's called The Disciples Toolbox. This came about because we were trying to figure out if you know, traditional, not traditional, because nothing we do is really traditional. But (if) the traditional form of worship was the only thing we wanted to offer in our online space. And we had some people that were adverse to that type of worship, but still wanted to be with us and community. Also, the pandemic came, and we needed to provide some more opportunities for people to come together, but not necessarily always in

a worship way. So we developed this toolbox, The Disciples Toolbox to be able to have a webinar workshop, where people could come in and talk to us and teach us useful things that we could do as disciples and as we built community together. So it happens now, every fourth Thursday of the month, and that week, we do not have a worship service. So it takes care of what we do with church on that day. And we, again, open that up to our European church members, but also many, many people from the United States and Canada come as well, I would say between 30 and 40 people come for a Disciples Toolbox, and we record them all and they're on our Community of Christ Europe, YouTube page under the playlist, The Disciples toolbox. We started out with Larry McGuire, back in May of 2020, who did one on how to develop a sermon. We thought that was a really great thing. But we've had all kinds of people Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith had been to talk about responsible use of Scripture. Katie Harmon-McLaughlin has been in to do spiritual practices. Elray Hinrichsen and Andrew Bolton have talked on reframing the Book of Mormon in community, in Community of Christ, and many others as well. This year, we have been exploring the sacraments and we've had a great group of presenters from all over the world. We took a little summer break in July and August and we're back on in September. We have three more sacraments to do. In September we have Apostle Catherine Mambwe from Zambia who will be doing the workshop on the Lord's Supper or communion. In October we have Pastor and Seventy John Hamer from Canada, who will come and talk about the Blessing of Children. And finally, our last one in November will be the Sacrament of Ordination. And evangelists, Kirsten Nyeska, from Norway will finish up our, our series. So we're really excited about this. It's been very successful for us, and we love doing it. You can see all of these ministries to on our website, our website is pretty easy to remember, it's CommunityCircleEurope.org. And there you can find links to what we're doing these videos and also see what we're doing in the future if you want to join us as well. The other ministry that I'm part of, because I'm in Community Circle, but also the Ministry Coordinator for Italy. Now, for your listeners, that might sound like a very big title, but I just want to remind everyone, I'm the only member of the church. So the, beggars can't be choosers with world church, so I am fulfilling that role. And I take it very seriously. I love my Italian seekers. And there are quite a number of them. One is preparing for baptism, this fall, but it is Comunidad de Cristo Community of Christ in Italy. And Quarterly, we offer a service in the Italian language for our little community together too. So we open up our circle of Community Circle for people of other languages, as we always already said, and we provide a translation in our normal weeks. But we get together in our own language as well. Once a quarter to be able to be together as an Italian speaking community.

Carla Long 41:36

Oh, wow. You two certainly do not like grass grow beneath your feet, you are on the move. All of those things. I'm really exciting and really cool. And what a lineup for Disciples Toolbox coming up, what a line up. It's very, very cool.

Michael Wright 41:50

We're excited.

Carla Long 41:51

Yeah. And also how very European of you to take July and August off. I, how very European, I appreciate that very much actually.

Michael Wright 42:00

We think it's civilized.

Carla Long 42:03

It is very civilized. I don't know if all Americans would agree with me. But after I working in Europe for five years, I I think some of the ways Americans do things are not that civilized. So I think taking July and August off—very, very clever. Um, I have I guess I just have two more questions for you. The first one is when did Community Circle become an emerging congregation?

Gail Shurtleff 42:28

Oh, that was a big event. That was another wonderful thing. We went through a process with this, and Michael will talk about some of this when, during the next question. So I'll just say that this was a process. We worked for this. We were in discernment around this. We saw the need for it in 2019. We work through to 2020. We've worked into 2021. And finally, in December of 2021, we gathered with Joey Williams, who this was pretty much his last act as Mission Center President for Western Europe. He gathered that Sunday. And we had a business meeting to organize. Also present was Richard James. I cannot say enough how much support Richard has given to us around this. He and Joey were amazing. To get this done. It was a special service. It was, you know it it was the the moment when I got off the call afterwards and just went "EEEEee!" I was so so happy, thrilled, amazed that we had gone through this process of forming with four members what would be an emerging congregation and we continue as you've heard to grow.

Carla Long 44:31

Very cool. And yes, it's it's a quite a process. I'm so glad that it happened for you. That makes me really excited for you too. Okay, last question, I guess which just makes me sad because I love hearing about all of this. So last question. What was the preparation and discernment process like for your leadership team, as Community Circle evolved?

Michael Wright 44:55

Like Gail said that it was quite the processing and quite the process also in learning a lot of the structure of Community of Christ too. And where we fit in and where we didn't fit in. And so that was kind of an interesting process for all of us. We knew we needed to be a congregation, we just had to figure out how. But the spiritual part of the discernment process had multiple layers to it. And one of the things we did is we decided to do a visioning, a vision statement was what we decided to do. We hired a woman named Donna Ray Billings, who is not a member of Community of Christ, and located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to help us through the visioning process. We thought it would be great to have someone who was not a member of the church who would be able to help us with the language of reaching out to people who don't know our language, you know, our faith language. So she was incredible, really lovely. We met three times over a period of several months. And she gave us exercises to help us envision who we were being called to be, and give us ways to think about all that we were discerning and put it into less than 25 words. This was very complicated. I still remember one of the really fun exercises, and it actually was the first homework assignment, was that all of our leadership team had to write an article for the Herald. Now, this was not to be published. But this was the assignment. It's April 6 2030, anniversary of our church and movement, and Community Circle has

been chosen to be recognized at World Conference during the service of honor and recognition as the most influential emerging community. The church's international magazine, the Herald, would like to run an article prior to World Conference about your online congregation's recognition. Yes, you get to define most influential, be as tangible as you can. What has the congregation accomplished? Who has it served? And how has it served them? What impact has it had on the world? How is Community Circle funded? And what is unique about it? What is notable about the internal workings of Community Circle? How is it managed? What defines its leadership? Its culture? Who does Community Circle partner with within its unique style of relating to his parishioners? And what's the next big milestone after 2030, which the church...what is the church envisioning? So it, we were supposed to look from 10 years in the future, about what we could maybe see in our own community, it was awesome. And we all four had very, very different articles that we wrote. And we got to share them with one another and pick out things that were touching each of us. This was a humbling experience. But we felt like we really got to a place where we could describe who we wanted to be. Again, this isn't a mission statement. But rather, it's a statement of vision for our community. This is what our vision statement is and who we want to be, you can find this on our website. It says Community Circle is an inclusive and vibrant online Christian community that seeks to provide a safe space to flourish, and invites you to be an active creator of justice and peace in the world. So when we finished, we were so excited to turn in what we had come up with as a team over several months to Donna. And she said it made a lot of sense to her as a non member of our church. And it was a very clear focus and charter to use to expand our sacred work. That's what she left with us.

Carla Long 48:48

Oh, what an amazing exercise. That is, sounds so cool. I, I loved hearing that. Thank you so much. What a good idea for congregations to do.

Michael Wright 48:58

It was fun..

Gail Shurtleff 49:02

It was a blast!

Carla Long 49:07

Gail, do you? Did you have something you wanted to add?

Gail Shurtleff 49:11

Oh, yeah, first off, it was a blast doing average exercise. And before I forget, I will add one other major thing we did. But one of the things we did in preparation also for becoming an online community was we pulled together the wisdom of Andrew Bolton who had some doings with the First Nations. And we also talked with Art Smith, Apostle Art Smith about this as well. We use them to bounce off some ideas. I want to publicly thank them for their time and generosity with us. We couldn't have gotten the ball rolling without their heads in the process as well, of giving us some feedback of what might or might not work. Now, along with the vision statement, the next thing we did, which was very powerful, is that we utilized the services and ministry of Evangelist Michael Botts. And Mike came in as an evangelist to get the leadership team, to do a blessing with our team, to help us to gain some focus some insight. And it

really worked in helping us bond. It was a process just like if you were to go through an evangelist blessing for yourself, where you're asked questions about things that you need to think about. I'm not going to bring up any of the specific questions, I have chosen more to talk about the process of how it bonded us together. Our leadership team are an amazing group of people. And we're all different from different backgrounds. But this process served to enable us to connect on the spiritual level, which was needed. And it also opened up thoughts and avenues of thinking, you know, I have that blessing online. I can look at it, I can see where we need to go, where we might be getting lost, where we need to focus. And I've heard about these types of blessings for leadership teams, and even congregations, but I've never experienced one. This was powerful. And I'm so glad that we utilized Mike, in this process to do this. Because it made all the difference in going forward in our path, moving towards becoming an officially recognized emerging congregation.

Carla Long 52:28

Well, gosh, it just sounds like you and your leadership team and all Community Circle, just stay so busy doing amazing and wonderful ministry in Europe. And I'm so grateful for it. We've come close to the end of our podcasts, though. Is there anything that you want to add that, something I didn't ask that you wanted me to ask or something that you wanted to say before we close out?

Michael Wright 52:50

I don't I don't think so. I think that those were the the main points. Yeah. I mean, Gail, and I could talk forever about the Community Circle. But we we know that the these are the the most important things, I guess the thing that I would just maybe end with myself is just that innovation is possible and needed in the church today. We've been challenged through this process of metamorphosis from Prophet-President Veazey, about starting to think about things in new ways. And the pandemic really forced us to do that. And a lot of places to the church has a lot of financial constraints as well. And so being innovative, to be able to reach people is very important. And, and we were, we hold ourselves up as a model in, in one sense not, not to brag in any kind of way, but just to let people know that it's possible. And real meaningful community can come from these, these places. I am, both of us, are recent converts in the last three, four years to Community of Christ. And had it not been for this type of community, I would have no one. There's no, there are no churches in Italy. There are no Community of Christ members except myself here. And so it has been such a blessing to me to be able to have this special group of people from all over Europe, that that that want to be in community together.

Carla Long 54:30

Thank you for saying that. I really appreciate that. I have lots and lots and lots of thoughts about that innovative process. And I'm so glad that you brought that up. Thank you.

Gail Shurtleff 54:41

I'd like to add one thing too. and it goes along with that innovative process. I think one of the gifts that Circle can offer to the church as a whole is the process of the Innovation, and the willingness to experiment not only with within Circle, but to try new and wonderful things outside of it. I mean, what does ministry look like? What does walking with seekers look like when we are an online community? And you got, we're not in Utah, we're not sitting down with the secrets face to face. We can't do that. And I'm fortunate in that. Sometimes seekers are closer than others. And I was privileged to meet one

in person. And it was really a weird experience, because normally, I do it on Zoom. And I'm very glad that this person actually was willing to take the 45 minute car ride and meet with me as I couldn't drive to meet with them. It was powerful. I think that we're going to continue to innovate, to explore. And I suspect that as more people try this, online ministry won't be a rarity, it will become more common. At least that's my hope.

Carla Long 56:31

I can't help but agree with you, Gail. Michael and Gail, thank you so much for being on the podcast. Thank you for sharing your wonderful ministry with us and for sharing some pretty awesome ideas and some really exciting things that are coming up. I really appreciate that you've talked with me and told me all about it.

Michael Wright 56:49

Thanks for having us, Carla.

Gail Shurtleff 56:51

Yeah, thank you.

Josh Mangelson 56:52

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