

Harmony Welcoming and Affirming Program_final 12-7-22

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SPEAKERS

Josh Mangelson, Linda Stanbridge, Parker Johnson, Brittany Mangelson

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 00:33

Hello, everyone, welcome to another episode of *Project Zion Podcast*. This is Brittany Mangelson and I'm going to be your host for today as we take you through an episode of "What's Brewing", which is where we talk about what is going on in the Church as far as mission and ministry goes. So today I have on two of my good friends, Parker Johnson and Linda Stanbridge, and we are going to be talking about Harmony and their new Welcoming and Affirming Program. So, Harmony is a nonprofit that supports queer inclusion within Community of Christ and so, they have a new program to help congregations become not only welcoming but also affirming of the queer community, which is really important. So, I'm gonna throw it over to you two, to just quickly introduce yourselves and then we'll get going. So, Parker, why don't we start with you?

Parker Johnson 01:24

Hey, everybody, my name is Parker Johnson. I use he/him pronouns. I am the current president of Harmony and super excited to talk about the Welcoming and Affirming Program.

Brittany Mangelson 01:33

Awesome. And Linda?

Linda Stanbridge 01:35

My name is Linda Stanbridge. My pronouns are she and her, and I currently serve as the Harmony chaplain and excited to be back with you.

Brittany Mangelson 01:43

Awesome. Yes, we have had both of these fine folks on before and we'll be sure to link past episodes that we've done with them so you can get to know not only Harmony, but them in their ministry a little bit better. So, let's dive in to the program. I do want to say that there has been a Welcoming and Affirming Program, to some degree, that supported Community of Christ in the past. And we did a podcast several years ago about WCN and GALA merging and becoming Harmony, and so, part of that merging was revamping the Welcoming and Affirming Program that WCN used to provide for congregations. So, if you're confused about what I just said, go back and listen to the episode that's linked in the comments to get a little bit of the background. But here we are with a merged organization, Harmony, and Linda and Parker, as well as many others, have been working on creating a program for congregations, an educational piece, and so that's what we're going to be focusing on today. So, let's start out with just the basics. What is the Welcoming and Affirming Program?

Parker Johnson 02:53

I'll take a stab at that. First, I figure it's probably helpful to define what a Welcoming and Affirming congregation in a Community of Christ context looks like. Harmony defines that as a community that publicly, intentionally, and explicitly lives out its affirming policies following a purposeful and intentional, queer educational curriculum approved by Harmony. There are two important words there, welcoming and affirming, that I figure I'll also define here. So, welcoming is just what it sounds like. When you walk into a room and people will allow you to be in there with them, to basically show up and not have any sort of huge issues or flare ups just by existing in a space. To be affirmed is to be respected. It is to be completely celebrated. It is to be allowed to fully participate. And so, there is obviously a big disparity between being able to walk into a room and exist and the latter. So, becoming welcoming and affirming, we keep both words, because obviously first impressions matter and we want to have a really wonderful first impression and welcome people, but we also want to do the latter and be more affirming of those people and their experiences as they hopefully feel comfortable coming to a Community of Christ congregation. The program itself is essentially the support system that we put into place to assist congregations with becoming a living expression of the Church's affirming policies, in their particular context. So, Brittany, in previous podcast recordings, we talked about the national conference approach that Community of Christ has taken. So, a quick refresher is that rather than having a global approach to queer inclusion in Community of Christ, the Church has taken a cultural, contextual understanding of social issues, including queer issues. And so certain countries or multinational conferences have been held to be able to discuss these topics and approve policy changes to allow for full inclusion of queer folks. So, Harmony works specifically with folks in those countries that have had those types of conferences so that we can help move that needle within those spaces. Harmony provides trained facilitators to journey alongside congregations through the curriculum, and we find this really important for three main reasons. The first is that it provides a third-party mediator when conversations get tough. So, for folks in the Community of Christ context, you'll understand that oftentimes our congregations are quite small, usually only made up of a handful of families, and it can get awkward sometimes when you're trying to have difficult conversations, or even just serious topical issues that come up. So, we think it's important to have a third party there that can be able to say, well, now, let's just recenter for a second. Like, I'm feeling a lot of emotions on this particular topic. Let's step back for a second and do a spiritual practice or any sort of thing like that just as a touch point. Second, it establishes a relationship built on accountability between Harmony and the congregation itself. So having a facilitator reporting back to Harmony, not kind of as like a mole or anything, but to be able to say, how things are going, will

help ensure that we, as an organization, can respond with helpful suggestions when navigating potentially difficult topics. And we found through the program that people have big opinions on very different things depending on where they are in the world as they move through the curriculum. So sometimes the biggest issue that a congregation might discuss might be just the use of the word queer. Other times it could be pronouns. Other times, it could be deeper conversations on topics such as spectrums, or scriptural interpretation for that matter. And so, it just depends on, on what that's going to look like, and Harmony kind of has a whole arsenal of videos, helpful resources, books, things that we can recommend to help move through those particular topics if they become problematic. And lastly, it ensures consistency. So, we want to make sure that congregations that participate in the program, are able to experience a similar program, no matter where they are, and how they're moving through it. Whether it's online, hybrid, in person, having a trained facilitator will ensure that they have a consistent experience with our organization and with the curriculum itself.

Brittany Mangelson 06:56

I love all of that. It is so important to not just throw a bunch of material at a congregation and expect them to figure it out themselves. So, I really appreciate how intentional and how there's a supportive structure, like a scaffolding, that's going to help folks move through. These folks are going to be encountering new ideas for the first time and I just really think that having that support piece, especially like what you said, Parker, a lot of times in congregations, you know, you're, you're worshiping with family, and so sometimes these conversations can be awkward or have tension, etc. And so having a third party be mentoring and moving the congregation through that, I think, is really important. So, Linda, did you have anything to add to that?

Linda Stanbridge 07:44

Yeah, I was just gonna add on, listening to you talk about and describe how important it is to have these trained facilitators who have some skills and gifts in these areas, I think, you know, while this program is really focused on the queer community, the skills that congregation members are going to develop, as far as having difficult conversations, having one-on-one conversations, talking about some of these really big things, and learning conflict resolution skills, these are things that apply to a lot of other areas of welcome. So, you know, this program is really focused on this particular topic, but I think skills and relationships that are developed because of what you'll go through in this program, congregations will find it's really helpful to congregational life in other ways as well.

Brittany Mangelson 08:26

That's a really good point. And I think that it models such a healthy way for a community to work through things that might be a little challenging. And I think that especially nowadays, we're so easily stuck in our own echo chamber. And you know, we scroll through our feed and we just see the same stuff that we know is going to feed us, but being in a community where different ideas are presented, and then having that modeled, to then hopefully the next time some diversity or a new thought comes into a conversation etc., hopefully, you're right that those tools and skills of having conversations and learning how to really listen to understand, not like listen to correct or listen to fight back, etc., that just seems to be such an American, yeah. Like it's just so part of American culture right now where we're listening but then we're just ready to respond and fight back. But really moving through a difficult topic together, I think really does have lasting impact on a variety of situations. So that's awesome.

Linda Stanbridge 09:33

Yeah, absolutely. And I think this program has something that came from the original toolkit that we were using, in an older version of this same program, that actually names that part of our assumption, is that conflict is bad. But actually, conflict can be really good. And we want it to be nonviolent, of course, and we want it to be productive, but we're so trained to think that conflict, especially in congregations, is bad or that it's a sign of dysfunction. But often it's not. It can be a sign of growth and there are ways to do it in a really healthy way. And so, this part of it came from our experience, and part of it came from this old toolkit. But I think congregations will learn a lot of really, really helpful skills through that process.

Brittany Mangelson 10:11

I love that you said that.

Parker Johnson 10:12

Yeah, absolutely. So, I think it's also important to talk about the particular situation Community of Christ finds itself in right now, which is that historically, while we've had a lot of cultural sensitivities as we globalize, we've tended to be a denominationalist institution, and now with these national conferences, we're moving into this congregational situation where congregations have to take the initiative to move this conversation forward. There is no words of counsel coming from First Presidency to tell us how to navigate this. We have passed national legislation to basically prop up the fact that these conversations can happen and to allow these conversations to happen. But we don't have distinct leadership saying this is where we should go in your particular cultural context, because we've decided that it is a cultural issue to be decided at national settings. So, in that regard, I think we're teaching with this program, congregations how to lean into this a bit more, and that can be really interesting. I'm really finding a lot of great feedback, just as we've moved through the program with different congregations, that sometimes we get into these settings with the congregation, and they just have no idea how to move forward with a conversation that doesn't have direct guidance from the First Presidency, because ambiguity is scary sometimes. Like, where are we called to go? But it's also empowering at the same time to think in my cultural context, and my setting, and my community, and even in my neighborhood, and even in my congregation, where are we being called to go to meet the needs of the people there? So, it's overwhelming, but it's also really empowering at the same time. So, some of that, I think, hesitancy on the part of congregations, is super understandable, because this is just all new to us, and we're just trying to model that with this program, with the facilitators being there to journey alongside congregations.

Brittany Mangelson 12:02

Parker, thank you for saying that, because I think it's human nature to want to look to outside authority, right, for where we get our information from, or how we should be engaging in current culture. Religion is notorious for that. But what I love about this program is that it's coming from the queer community. And I know, just the little peek that I've gotten from it, I have learned a lot because the information is more in depth and diverse than what I just naturally see through my feed as I'm scrolling various social media sites, etc. Like, this is training that is coming from the community, and I think that that's really, really important. So, I'm glad that you brought that up. So, now that we have dipped our toes into the

program just a little bit, let's talk about what congregations can do to get involved. So how does a congregation initiate the process and get started in the Welcoming and Affirming Program?

Linda Stanbridge 13:01

Great question. We have updated the program, as we've mentioned a little bit, and we're both millennials, so you can do it just on a website without even having to talk to a real live human being. If you're to visit our website, which is harmony.lgbt, and navigate over to our "Welcoming and Affirming Congregations" page, you're gonna check out the section that says "Request More". So, a pastor or someone from the pastor team, a congregation leader can go there, enter your email, and you're going to automatically get a response from us. This is the first portion of what we're calling the "Prepare" section. So, this is where the congregation begins to do work on their own. The pastor or leader is going to begin collecting information from Harmony so that you can start that first step, which is forming your support team. So, the support team is going to be made of, in past versions of this program, what was called the core team. The support team are people within the congregation who are going to have a little bit of additional training provided by Harmony before the congregation even begins the journey together. So, we're preparing the congregation to go on this journey. We want to have at least three people on a support team. There are some congregations that might have more, depending on what your ministry is like. If you have a new expression, that might be different. But typically, we want to have about three people on a support team. Those people are going to go through what we call a train the trainer course, and it's a free online, self-paced course. It's written specifically by Harmony and it speaks really directly to our Community of Christ context. It's going to give you sort of a quick overview of what the congregation will see in the second section of the program and it helps to just prepare leaders to begin this program with their congregation. In past versions of this program, what we kind of found was that the core team, the group that was supposed to lead from within the congregation and really worked closely with a facilitator to make sure that congregation is invested and that the process is meaningful, they didn't have additional training. They kind of knew what the congregation knew and it's hard to lead when you don't feel like you have some base knowledge. Like you were saying, Brittany, you're a good ally, you've been doing the work for years. We all have to continue to do this work, and we want to give people a bit of a leg up, give them some training, so that they feel ready to support others. And it's not to say that once you've gone through this train the trainer you've arrived. It's to say that you're going to be willing to step out and do some of that preparation to help lead within your congregation. So, we want to have at least three of those people that will complete that training before the congregation moves into a relationship with a facilitator and begins their group work. All of that happens in the online self-paced course and congregations have a lot of time to complete that. We definitely know that people are busy and that the demands on leadership and congregations can be a lot. I think, though, that you'll find that this is actually a really meaningful process to go through. So, before I get into the next section, which is going to be how the congregation actually walks through the program, I'll kind of pause there, because that was like a funnel of information, and see if you have kind of any thoughts or questions on that section, Brittany, or if Parker, maybe you can think of something I might have missed?

Brittany Mangelson 16:14

I just think that the way that you've pieced this out is really important. And I think that a lot of times, well, I have seen that maybe some congregations, they think like, oh, we have queer people in our

pews and so we're ready for it, or you know, like we've already arrived, like we're already there. We're already welcoming and affirming. But I think that having this first step of preparation can really show you what your baseline is and really help folks understand. Like me, again, when I was going through just the little snippets that I've seen, it's like, oh, I've already learned some new things, right? And so just having that baseline understanding to know where you're starting from, and to have a group of people who, you know, like a core team, who you know are on board with it, I think is really, really important. Because, again, there's a real reason why this program exists and it's because religions have historically caused a lot of harm to the queer community. And so, by having that buy in from folks, we really need to do no harm. And so, I think that preparation piece and starting at a foundation with a core group of people is just really important.

Linda Stanbridge 17:24

Yeah, absolutely. While you were talking, that buy in was the perfect phrase. We really need to get that buy in early. And we know that there's congregations where maybe 100% agreement isn't possible, but it's the goal. And when we have enough people with buy in, we're willing to have those hard conversations. We can do the work and we can get there. We can get to that type of consent. But I really do think the first step is understanding that churches, this is our harm to undo. This is pain that we've caused. This is our work. Sometimes we excuse ourselves a little too easily from the harm that we've caused and really, the first step is to prepare yourself to begin to do the work and accept that this is a lifelong journey. There's never going to be a point where we arrive and we get to sit back and rest. And if we get to that point, then we know, surely, we've gone off track. It's just not, unfortunately, the way inclusion works. I think it would be wonderful if we felt like we could take a class and be done with that but people are so much more wonderfully complex than that. And so, it is a journey. And so, the, the next part of the journey for a congregation is to get matched with a facilitator. Our goal on this is to have two cohorts a year, probably one in the fall and one in the spring, maybe some flexibility on dates, groups of congregations that will go through the program at the same time. And this is, a few things, one, it kind of streamlines it for us so that we're not the funnel or the bottleneck on the program. It's difficult to get enough really, high-quality volunteers, facilitators who have experience in these areas. Many of our facilitators are seminary trained. They have experience in conflict resolution. They've taken all kinds of training on the side. So, it does take some time to really get great facilitators and vet them. So, moving congregations through in cohorts a couple times a year is a little bit more streamlined. So, there's nine modules in the new program. So, by the time you get matched to a facilitator, you've got a trained support group that's ready to jump in, the congregation knows what's happening, you're agreeing on how often you're going to meet with your facilitator. When is it going to fit in your schedule? What are your plans? Once you start going through the curriculum, it takes you through kind of a consistent plan for each session. So, it'll be probably customized to what your context is and what the personality of your facilitator is, and what their particular gifts are, but typically, there's going to be some kind of a devotional element. We want to remind people that this is spiritual work, so it's not just work that we do in our heads to better understand what's good going on with people, but also to transform hearts so, there's a real devotional aspect to that. Focusing on one-to-one sharing, we're just training that congregation members would get on how to have those one-on-one conversations, doing some discussions, watching videos. Each module is a little bit different, but brings in a few different types of media. And then another important element is having some kind of homework and a reflection time. So, the homework, you know, is different for each section. And I won't give away all the good details. There

are some *Project Zion Podcasts* on there so, shout out to y'all. For example, when we're getting ready to talk about Scripture, which is a really important portion of this section that we call Learn and Grow this congregational work, Scripture is an important part of that. It's a hang up for some people. We're going to have you dive into what is the Community of Christ statement on scripture? What does Community of Christ think about Scripture? How do we talk about it and how do we value scripture? We're gonna refer out to some other great experts like Queer Theology. They have some awesome information on what we call the "clobber passages". So, we'll provide you with some resources because this is work for congregations to do in between. And then when you come back, you have time to reflect as a large group on the homework and kind of digest some of that. But I think what we really want to show is that it's not just hard work, it's also heart work and that this is actually, really deeply, Community of Christ. The majority of the resources that are used come from Community of Christ and that's to say that this work is about how much we love this church and how much we want this church to be the welcoming place that we know that can be when we're willing to do this work. So, it really intentionally refers back to who we already know and say that we are. And so that Learn and Grow section, it's nine modules. It depends on the frequency that you and your group and your facilitator would agree on. You know, a congregation could meet every week and be done in three months or so if they, they were really ready to move forward and have done a lot of that work on their own. But the most important thing is really for congregations to move through this learning and growing phase at a pace that's really meaningful and that allows them to do the work they need to do. And that just looks different in every single context.

Brittany Mangelson 22:07

Well, I just love that it sounds like it can be pretty customizable, right? And I think that that is also really important that people understand going into it. I think that when congregations want to engage in a new ministry, education program, whatever, it's important to know what they're getting into. And I think that the flexibility, and that it's not just all one track, that this is exactly how long it's going to be, it's customizable. And I think that will hopefully lead to a lot more congregations feeling like it's a doable task.

Linda Stanbridge 22:41

Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 22:41

Not so overwhelming.

Linda Stanbridge 22:43

Yes. And I think that was one of the things that was not great in the previous iteration of this program. I mean, it was an ecumenical tool that we were using so it wasn't super specific to Community of Christ, but it was not nearly as customizable to our specific contexts. I think we have some congregations, they feel like they're really welcoming and they want to rush through the program, and they want to go nine weeks back-to-back, and then they get partway through and they realize, we're having so much rich discussion, actually rushing through this is may be a disservice. We're learning more about this topic than we thought. So, you know, slowing down isn't always a bad thing. The goal isn't necessarily to finish the program. The goal is to be transformed. So, then, the final section of this, and I say final

gently, because really, it's taking that last, big first step, and we call that section "Embrace and Embody". And when you go to our website, like I mentioned, and you're on the section about our Welcoming and Affirming Program, you'll see a really nice graphic that Parker created that describes the flow of the program that I've been describing. So, if you're a visual person, that might be really helpful. But we call this last section, "Embrace and Embody" and it's really about understanding what this welcome and this affirmation is going to look like for you in your congregational life, how your congregation will live out this process that you've been through. What's it going to look like in your congregational life? So, part of the last stages of the program include writing your own welcoming and affirming statement. And so, we'll show you some statements that we think are really great, and some we think aren't great. We'll give you some examples, but then we want you, as a support team and as a congregation, because we want as many people in the congregation to participate as possible, to write your own statement on welcome. And when you have that prepared and, you know, Parker and I have had a chance to look at it, or the congregation support coordinator has had a chance to look at that statement, your congregation votes on it in a business meeting. So, you have to go through the whole process, give them the two weeks notice, and we want you to vote on it at a business meeting. It is that important. It is that important. We want to make sure that we didn't just go through the process to say that we're welcoming, but that enough of us have been transformed in some way that we're ready to really make this part of who we are and we want to see that happen in a business meeting. And then we'll also provide you with some really great resources at the end. Parker wrote a really great sample that you could send out to a newspaper or things, press release, you could put out on your social media, to talk to the community about who you are. You've done this amazing work, you should celebrate it, and you should find a way to use it as a tool to share this love and this welcome that you have for other people. So that's the really long and somehow still pretty short version of what this program kind of looks like. So, I'll pause there and see if I've missed something, Parker, or if you have some questions or reflections, Brittany.

Parker Johnson 25:30

First of all, thank you for walking us through that because, for those who are listening, Linda and I have kind of made up a small board committee that's been auditing what we had before, and then the program that we inherited and the type of program I wanted to move forward with. And even though I've been steeped in it, and making decisions with it, it's always nice to kind of have it reexplained back to me, the direction we're going because there's so many more opportunities for check ins than we had before. When oftentimes, people get busy, like Linda said earlier, and you know, they'd say, have great intentions and start the program, and then we would just not hear back from them, because they would have taken the summer off, or they would have done something because several people in the congregation may have fallen ill, or different things like that. This just gives us a lot more structure to work from to ensure that this holy work can continue as efficiently as possible. Obviously, we're human, and obviously, sometimes breaks are required. But I do want to just kind of go back to something that Linda said, which is, of course, you can move through this as quickly as you want. I was very pleasantly surprised at how much my own congregation had to discuss within the program when we did it here. For those who know me, I'm in Calgary, Alberta. And we had such rich conversation about things that I didn't even think that we would be talking about, that weren't specifically mentioned in the curriculum, but would tangentially be connected to the topics that we were discussing. And so, it was just so healing for me, first of all, as a queer person, to have these conversations with people in my own

congregation that I sit with, and worship with, and sing with, to be able to just wholly experience this moment of, we're actually going to give this topic the time it deserves. And it just really, I think, has so many benefits. And we're going to talk about this a bit later, but you don't graduate from the program, you will just continue to be given continuing ed opportunities and continual checkpoints with Harmony's board of directors to ensure that you have what you need, because leadership is going to change, the general demographic makeup of your congregation is going to change over time, and it might be that refresher courses are useful later on. But we want to make sure that when we invite people in, particularly marginalized communities into our congregations, that they are fully supported, and that we are fully prepared for their arrival. And that's what this program is all about.

Linda Stanbridge 27:54

Yeah. And you know, I think the thing too, is just because we've completed this program doesn't mean that now we're perfectly ready to welcome somebody, that mistakes are going to happen, and we can't unfortunately, guarantee that a space is completely safe. But I think what hopefully comes out of this program is a space that's courageous and loving, and also has some accountability, that the congregation really takes this on as being important to them, and that you continue to move through it and encourage and hold each other accountable, as we go through this work.

Parker Johnson 28:24

Yeah, absolutely. There's a congregation, a different denomination, I think the Baptist Church here in Calgary where I live, that's actually part of the curriculum that you'll move through, if you go through the program. And they have a big marquee sign out in front of their church building, it's a beautiful church building, and it says, "ALL ARE WELCOME" in all caps. And I think earlier this year or last year it was all in the news, because the membership of that church voted to exclude members of the LGBT community from even general membership, not to mention leadership positions or anything. And they got so much flack for it because their sign said, "ALL ARE WELCOME". And oftentimes in Community of Christ, we hear really well meaning feedback and maybe even pushback to say, why are we calling out and labeling, I'm using air quotes as I say that, people with "identity markers"? And this is why. It, because, for the Baptists in that particular context, all are welcome doesn't mean what we think it means when we sing that hymn. It is not the same thing. And so, for folks who have been hurt by the Church, and I, Church with the capital C, they're looking for specificity. They're looking for us to say who we're talking about when they say that, because I just walked by that church last week, I was talking to Linda on the phone, and I was like, yup, their ALL ARE WELCOME sign is still up, and they see no problem with that. And that's their context, but we exist within their context, even though we are a different denomination and we have to own that. We have to know that, okay, these other groups within Christian denominations are saying these types of things. We have to speak a similar language, but we have to say what we mean. And so, we always have to think about who we're serving, right. And so, these marginalized communities, if I'm a queer person walking around, and I see all these signs that say, "All Are Welcome", and then I hear that someone's created a welcome statement, and they issue a press release in their local paper that says, "Yay, we did the thing and all are really welcome." I'm not going to believe you until you tell me who you're talking about. Because fool me once. So that's the thing that we're trying to work against, which is the reason that we need to be specific whenever we say these types of things. And it's also difficult because even congregations that are in more conservative spaces, I've heard this feedback as well, all their hearts are in the right place, all their minds are in the

right place, they've even gone through the curriculum, but they're afraid to fly a pride flag because they might get vandalized, for example. But God calls us to strange places sometimes. And while we do not want to put anyone in a situation when they might be physically harmed, the church is called to fly that flag, to be the lights, the beacon on a hill, for folks looking for a safe space to worship and to be fully accepted and affirmed. So that's a journey in and of itself, but I just referenced that as the fact that there are stumbling blocks, even after the work has been done. Fully lean into that and be cautiously optimistic, but willing to potentially have some issues with their local community. And I think, Brittany, in Salt Lake, your flag has been taken a few times. So those things are probably going to happen. But as a person in the queer community, I'll tell you, I'm looking to see how churches react when things like that happen. How do they respond when it's taken down? Do they just stop flying it, because that tells me something about them. That tells me that maybe they're not quite confident in what they've done, or the work that they've done. So, I just mentioned those stories, because there is importance in us actually leaning into the work of the welcome statements and being really specific with how we verbalize and formalize our welcome and our affirming status.

Linda Stanbridge 31:59

And I think really looking for allies that recognize there is some degree of risk to this. Yeah, your building might get vandalized, but we need allies with skin in the game because there are people in this community going through much worse. So yeah, we know it's not without a risk to the building, but to have some skin in the game is really the allyship that the community needs.

Brittany Mangelson 32:19

Absolutely. And I just want to say that I think it's good for every straight, cis person who claims themselves to be Christian, to have this reality check. Parker, as you were telling your story I was reminded of when we were in seminary, Linda was there too, we were all seminarians together, but we went at one of the focus sessions on a Sunday and traveled to a bunch of different denominations. And if I remember right, literally not a single church we visited that day was really open about queer affirmation and inclusion. And I remember we went to a church that was more of a mega church, and they had a ton of youth programs and a ton of those low key, all are welcome kind of platitudes that Christians put out, and I remember sitting next to you, Parker, and we had a stack of their literature on our laps, and you were looking through it, and there're really subtle markers, like theological words, that would point to them actually very much not being inclusive. And that was honestly the first time that I had like, sat with church literature in my lap and had like, really recognized how the baseline was not affirming. And I think that Community of Christ, we need to look ourselves in the mirror, and a lot of our information that's out there, a lot of the Scriptures that we use, like, historically, these documents and these words have been presented from an unaffirming place. And so, what Linda said, this is the work of the Church, this is the work of Christians. And we do need to have some skin in the game. And we do need to be willing to look at our past demons, again, in the Church, capital C, of the harm that we've done. And so, it was just a really eye-opening experience for me, because at that particular mega church, it was like, oh, I'm the mom of three kids, they would have all of these programs and whatever and then to kind of be slapped in the face with, well, they say they're welcoming, but there is literally nothing that even remotely points to that actual inclusion and affirmation of folks who are not straight and cis. And that's a problem. That's a big problem when it's paired with statements of quote/unquote, "welcome". So, thank you. Thank you for calling that out so directly because it's really, really important.

Linda Stanbridge 34:52

It's funny, thinking about mega churches. We have, we live in a very rural area, so to call it a mega church would be, and I'm a dramatic person, but that would be beyond dramatization, but they probably have like 50 kids in their youth group. And again, we live in a very small town, and I think to myself, I mean, can you even fathom having 50 kids in a congregation, how incredible that would be? And they've rented our, I live at a Community of Christ campground, so they've rented our facility before. They put on an amazing camps and activities for their kids but this particular denomination is not affirming. And I imagine what it must be like to be the youth pastor and to know your kid and to know what your faith community says about their worth and their value. On the other hand, there's the Spiral Congregation in my Mission Center, Michigan Mission Center, that's constantly full of kids, and is doing amazing work, baptizing and confirming kids and creating a safe space for children. They have an LGBTQ youth group for kids. Unbelievable. It's honestly, absolutely amazing work. And the reality is that these spaces just don't exist unless we create them. There are plenty of other spaces for your run of the mill kids, but for these kids who are really marginalized, and of course for adults too. But just thinking about the draw of megachurches as a parent, you know, just access to the activities and the socializing. I think what we have isn't maybe as fancy, but, but we have something that the bigger churches don't have if we choose to really live into it. And it does save and transform lives. And some of our communities are doing that. We know it's possible, because we see them doing it, right? It can absolutely be done. It takes a lot of courage and work, but we know this work is tough.

Parker Johnson 36:29

Yeah, absolutely. And I appreciate you giving some positive examples of groups within Community of Christ that are really leaning into that work. So grateful for all the stuff that they're doing. Really, the part that I think is important for a takeaway for our cisgender straight friends, is that many of us in the queer community, especially youth, are very, I'm incredibly critical of language that seems empty, of language that seems ambiguous, especially intentionally ambiguous, because like Linda, I grew up in a rural Bible belt state, and I can't tell you how many times I was lured in with pizza lunches for free, or whatever, to these very conservative churches that seemed fun. They had volleyball matches. They had music groups you could join. They had game nights. They did all these things, and then at the end of the day, I would feel like crap about myself, because I would go home, and they would have talked about how homosexuals are going to burn in hell. And so, there's this bait and switch idea behind a lot of these things, too. But personally, and this is a Community of Christ ideal as well, we aren't here to be entertained. We're here to do the mission of Christ. And so, while some of those things seem flashy, and really exciting, and fun, and I don't have children, so, but I'm assuming it'd be very similar. Like, I want to have something that my kids could be in a safe space and Christ-centered activity or event, but at the end of the day, they tend to not be Christ-centered events. And that's the hard part. And I don't mean to throw shade on other denominations, because we have plenty of things within Community of Christ that we need to work on, but I just struggle with the bait and switch idea that people tend to think, oh, well, let's just stop talking about our differences, and let's just say all are welcome and leave it at that. But I'm here to tell you that if you say that, people within the queer community are going to look at you with a lot of scrutiny, and they're gonna say, I don't think that that's safe for me. That's why this work is important. And that's why being specific is important.

Brittany Mangelson 38:26

Yeah, absolutely. And I'm, sometimes I'm baffled at the different churches around here, where I see a lot of migration from an unaffirming church that claimed to be affirming, and then a lot of folks attach themselves to, again, some of those flashy churches. And now I have the skills to look at their website and look at their statements of belief, and I see like, oh, actually, they're not affirming and they don't even ordain women and I'm like, friends, why are we doing this to ourselves. There's a better way to do Christianity. And from my opinion, it always, always, always comes from the side of the oppressed and the side of those who are in the margins, who society has pushed out. And so, yeah, I'm really grateful for Harmony and all the work that you all have done. And we've already touched on this quite a bit, but is there anything else that you can say to why it's important that congregations actually go through this intentional process of becoming welcoming and affirming? Again, I know that there's a lot of, I don't know, maybe hesitancy, or folks just think like, oh, we have a gay person that sits in our pews or we have a bisexual person on our leadership team, so we're good, like gold standard. Why is that actually not enough? Why is it important for congregations to have this intentional process?

Parker Johnson 39:48

I think we owe it to the community that we promised welcome to, that we promised love and support and respect and affirmation to, to actually take these steps. Holding a national conference or a multi-national conference was obviously a necessary first step to allow for these conversations to happen, but the assumption that all of us would just somehow become less ignorant overnight is just really short sighted. And I know that the word ignorant might be a little bit cringy for some people, but ignorance is just when we don't know any better. We have to create a new baseline that says, we know better, and we can do better. So, passing legislation, great. That was the first step and it was ahead of its time, quite frankly. Very amazing that we did that and we are moving forward in other countries to do something similar, but as we already talked about, people in marginalized communities, like the queer community, we do our research before we put ourselves in harm's way. And so, when I google affirming churches, there's not a long list, first of all, and second of all, Community of Christ does tend to come up because we have a lot of welcoming language woven into our web content, which is great. However, it depends very much geographically where you are. If you're in a rural area, and you see that there's a Community of Christ congregation near you, you're gonna have a really different experience, potentially, than someone in a more urban setting. And that very well could be the opposite, that can be flipped on its head, depending on the areas that have actually done the work. So, I think for me, as a queer person, when I think of the why behind all of this, I think that being clear with our intentions, is reasonable to expect from queer people. I think that the people that we serve, marginalized communities, we are not a club, we are a mission focused organization that is out there trying to create more space for more people at a larger table. And when we don't do that, but we tell everyone we do that, and then they show up, and they have a really unfortunate experience, that's on us. We just lured someone in with the assumption that they'd be safe, celebrated, loved, affirmed, and then probably made a bunch of unfortunate missteps. I want to make it very clear that I'm not saying that people in the church are intentionally cruel or doing anything to be just plain mean. I can't tell you how many times I've walked into a congregation, I'm a white, cis-het, queer man, and every time I walk into a church, it seems, that's not my home congregation or that doesn't know me, "Hi, are you married? Do you have a wife?" That's the first thing that I always get. Or the assumption whenever I take a phone call with the bank, about like, with my spouse. They always ask about her name. These are things that I deal with

every single day, and that is nothing compared to what a lot of other folks in the queer community deal with. But those are really low hanging fruit things that we can deal with as a congregation, as a community, and say, let's think through how we greet people. Let's wear name tags. Let's understand the importance of pronouns and why this person has felt unaffirmed their entire life, and now suddenly, yeah, it is a big deal that you use the right pronoun. It might not seem like a big deal to you because you've always felt aligned with your gender. But these are important things. And so, a lot of it, I think, tends to come from just exposure to stories. We've heard a lot of really great feedback, that hearing stories from those actually impacted by things that the Church has done or, I should say Church, meaning the collective, that we're all guilty of. Those really help, I think, move hearts forward a little bit to be like, okay, this felt a little bit ridiculous to me at first to ask for someone's pronouns, but now that I've read about the suicide rates, now that I've understood that, oh, my gosh, what we used to do, or what we even still do, in some places, this is important work. And we can do this. It's not hard. I just need to put my intentions there and actually do the work. And so, in closing, I will just say, we don't deserve queer people in our congregations if we don't do the work, and their gifts, and their experiences, and their talents, and their beauty, and their unique lenses that they bring to the table. We do not deserve them unless we do the work. And so, to go around saying that we've done the work is harmful. It's violent. It's a lie. We've started the work. Now let's do it. Let's actually get through it together.

Brittany Mangelson 44:11

Amen, brother. Linda, do you have anything to add to that?

Linda Stanbridge 44:16

I just want to make sure to add that I think, to circle back to something we mentioned earlier about feeling like the solution or the next program is going to drop out of the sky from above from the apostles or from the spiritual formation team or something, but when it comes to this kind of work, I think this is really a grassroots thing. So, we're used to thinking that this is may be the job of the pastor or the pastor team, or whoever is in charge of the congregation to do this work, but actually if you're listening and you participate in Community of Christ congregation or ministry or mission center, have that conversation with your pastor, with your leadership team, with your mission center president. We don't have to sit around waiting for others to make a change. This is something that we have the power to begin doing now. I think in the long run we'd like to have courses that are available for individuals to take to educate themselves outside of the congregation experience, but you can make a difference. Talk to the people in your congregation. Talk to your pastor team and mission center president, whatever orgs. and groups that you serve with and worship with. This grassroots thing is the only way that this work gets done. It has to be done one on one, one congregation at a time. So, like we've said this whole time, be empowered to make that change happen.

Brittany Mangelson 45:27

Absolutely. Well, I'm motivated and I hope that others are as well. I am curious to know what are the kinds of things that are going to be taught in the program. We've kind of touched on it a little bit, but I'd like to really hone in on what is the content of the program?

Linda Stanbridge 45:46

It comes in about nine modules. And the main things that we're going to hit in the program are developing some skills. So, learning about the culture of our congregation, around conflict, conflict resolution skills, and de-escalating, relational organizing, and then, one-to-one visits are a tool that came over with us from the previous program, which is a way of having a really specific one-on-one conversation with someone around these difficult topics that we're going to navigate. So, you learn those skills early on, and then they show up in every one of the following modules. Right off the bat, we start having a conversation about power, privilege, and allyship. This conversation has to happen right away because privilege is one of those things that many of us get triggered about. So, we talk through that right off the bat. It's a conversation that we have to have. We're going to move through the acronyms, what each of those letters represent, the people that that letter represents, their identity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. A lot of people have a hard time understanding the difference between those, so we want to make sure that's clear so that we can better understand who people are when they come to us. And then also talking through the history of the queer community in Community of Christ. And that touches a little bit on some of our books which we'll recommend to you and you can find on our website. Talking about stories, that's an important part of the journey. But it's going to take you through what it's been like, what work has been done, what work is yet to do. Scriptural interpretation is another aspect that gets covered pretty thoroughly. That's its own module in this program. Again, it looks really more specifically at how Community of Christ views Scripture because ultimately, that is what describes really why we don't spend a lot of time on the clobber passages. So, the clobber passages are a handful of passages that people have historically used to oppress and abuse people in the queer community. So, I spend a ton of time on those, because that just doesn't really fit with how we understand Scripture as a denomination. So, we have resources there around that. If you're a person who struggles particularly with those passages, you need to do some of that work. But really, it's about understanding the scriptural story for Community of Christ, where this welcome comes from. And then another really important thing that comes up is running some scenarios. One of our congregations, I think it was Calgary, that had written the scenarios...

Parker Johnson 48:06

Yeah, one of our facilitators, Ashley...

Linda Stanbridge 48:08

Yeah.

Parker Johnson 48:08

...and Caitlin Ball.

Linda Stanbridge 48:10

Okay, wonderful. So, yeah, Caitlin Ball and Ashley Sebree were working with a Calgary congregation and they wrote these amazing scenarios, and so, we kept them and integrated in this new version of the program that's gonna take you through some of these. Person walks into your congregation, here's the scenario, how do you respond? Then it's gonna give you the opportunity to practice a little bit. We can't take you through every scenario that could possibly happen, and will happen as part of this journey, but to help you to start to understand how to respond, especially if you mess up, because you're gonna mess up, we all do, and mess up all the time, but to have some scenarios to work through

that. One module is on the welcoming statement that your congregation will need to create and vote on together. And then kind of that last module is looking forward to say, what's the next step, right? Because this isn't the last step. We're looking for that. What is the next step? How do we live this out? How do we make this real in our community? Talked a lot about how marginalized the community is, so what's our response? Learning what we have, I mean, having been transformed, what's next for us?

Brittany Mangelson 49:12

So, I absolutely love and definitely took note that we aren't going to be focusing so much on the exclusion part, aka the clobber scriptures, because, spoiler alert, Community of Christ should be past that, right?

Linda Stanbridge 49:30

Right.

Brittany Mangelson 49:31

That is arguably the work that was done prior to 2013, and I mean, I say that from a U.S. place, but prior to national conferences. And so, if you [*inaudible*] congregation are going through this journey, the starting point looks different than other denominations, because to Parker's point, Community of Christ has done some theological work. But it sounds like this program is really diving into the application of it, which is, I think, really important because, again, there has been and can be some disconnect between the theology and then what queer folks experience when they walk through a door. So, I really, really like that that point was made, and that's where we're at. That's our reality.

Linda Stanbridge 50:15

Yeah. And I mean, having worked with several congregations, I think this is a question that comes up not every time, but often. I think most of our congregations are there. They understand what our scriptural interpretation is, what our view of Scripture is as a denomination, but generally, there's one or two people, or sometimes more, definitely depends on the context and the region, who have a more evangelical or literal understanding of Scripture. And I think some of that has to do with being kind of what I call culturally Christian. We just absorb a part of the culture around us, which is often very evangelical Christianity. And so that can be a holdup for some people. But I find that that's, well, first of all, it's work we need to do anyway, because it affects how we understand the entire Gospel, the entire Gospel message, and what the life of Christ is about. But I think it can be one of the most impactful pieces of this journey, because it does unfold so much of what you understand about your spirituality and your journey. So, I think the other piece and the other reason not to linger on the clobber passages is because we do know that often in congregations, whether they're out or not, there are queer folks who are listening, and they're watching how you're having these conversations as a group, whether they choose to come out to you or not. And so, the idea isn't to trigger those folks who might be walking this journey with you, but to provide resources for the folks who need that. It's not really part of our overall story to indulge in that too much, but we know that it pops up from time to time. And it's just not where we choose to linger, I guess.

Brittany Mangelson 51:46

Absolutely. I love that. Thank you for clarifying and just highlighting that again, because I do think that it's really, really important to be honest about the work we've done, where we are, and where we're going. And then also who's listening and who's watching us do this process. All really, really, really important work, so thank you. I have just a few more questions, and again, this might seem kind of obvious, but I want us to name it. Who benefits from this work? Why is it important? Who is the group that we're hoping to serve through becoming welcoming and affirming?

Parker Johnson 52:26

Yeah, that's a really great question. And I think it's simple in response in that we all benefit. But it's an interesting experience, because it's both an internal process and an external process. So, you're reflecting, unlearning old habits, learning and implementing new things, and then embracing and embodying all those new learnings in your life beyond the church even. I'll just mention, from a policy standpoint, the Church is in a really strange place, as we've already talked about. And so, the Church itself is leaning into the tension of being a global denomination that embraces cultural distinctives, which can be uncomfortable for some people, depending on what side of the aisle you are on, on particular issues. But just as an example, at present we have countries with the Community of Christ presence that have passed fully affirming queer policies at a national or multinational conference. And we also have countries where the church has a presence, where queer acts are subject to violence and even death. So, we're trying to uphold both the full inclusion of and the criminalization of queer folks depending on the nation in which they reside under the same Community of Christ umbrella. So obviously, this is confusing and complex and hurtful and harmful, and quite frankly, kind of impossible. But we are working with what we have, and we are moving ahead where we can. So as far as who benefits, I think internally, completing the program will bring us all as a denomination, as a congregation, as a mission center, as a field, as a nation, into better alignment with who we claim to be, and who we benefit from the perception that we are. Oftentimes people look to Community of Christ as being just this progressive denomination. Especially from Latter-day Seeker standpoint, people often look to Community of Christ as being more progressive in certain areas, more egalitarian, more inclusive. We have to do the work to actually bring those things into alignment of who we say we are and who we actually are. And then externally, certainly the most important benefit of all this is that queer folks can have a safe place, and affirming faith community with whom they can fully participate and grow. So, it's both internal and external. But you have to do that internal work first before you can start proclaiming to the world that you are something that you just simply haven't done the work for or earned the title or label of being affirming.

Linda Stanbridge 54:54

You know, I think something that we haven't mentioned yet, but it's important to say is that congregations benefit immensely when you have a queer person in your congregation. This different way of being and understanding yourself, this different and unique way of understanding the gospel, benefits everybody. I think we get afraid of having too many different types of life experiences or too many different perspectives. And we get so stuck in the fear that we forget that there are gifts that we receive when we open up to new types of worship and new understandings of God. And to be willing to see the image of God in someone that is different, really is, just shows how expansive God is and God's love is. And we forget that there's a gift that we don't always deserve. Honestly, we're not always deserving of that gift. But to have folks in our community worshiping together is just, it's an experience

that all of us should hope to strive to be worthy of having that type of community together. But just to know that there are some incredible aspects of God that you can understand by worshiping with people that are different than you and that you might not have realized that something that you could benefit from too.

Brittany Mangelson 56:05

Well, and to bring kids back into it, I would much, much, much rather have my kids worship with queer folks than worship in a congregation that has no queer folks, but has flashy programming. I would rather worship in a group of people who can live loud and proud of who they are, than this facade of, and I'm like struggling to get emotional because it is personal to me. And one of the big drives with my own faith transition was a moment where I was sitting in an unaffirming church, and I was singing an unaffirming song with a group of kids, and I just had this overwhelming feeling that there were queer kids in this room right now that maybe they didn't realize it, maybe they did, but I was part of the harm. And that is one thing that was massively transformative with my faith transition. And I went to Community of Christ, and there were less than 10 people there, and I would say half of them were queer. And there was a trans woman who transitioned in her late 50s, and busting through those strict stereotypes with gender, etc., that was exactly what I wanted for my kids. And so, hands down, 100% of the time, I would rather go to a place where no matter who my kids are, they will be loved and accepted and affirmed. And that affirmation is super, super important than any church that has more money, or flashy programming, or a pretty sign or whatever. Like, that's not what's important. Having an image and model of God that truly is inclusive of all people, and reflective of all people in all of our colors, genders, orientations, everything, abilities, that is the gospel message. And I did not think I was going to cry on this podcast, but I did a little bit, because it's so important. And I think that Community of Christ, we get so down on ourselves sometimes that we aren't the big, flashy, mega church. But like you said, Parker, I think like, this program is grassroots and that's what Community of Christ is. And so, if we can just acknowledge where we've been, the decisions that we've made, and most importantly, the work that we still have to do, I have a lot of hope for our little denomination. Like, I really do. If we can get it right, and just keep doing what we've already done, and just continue that work forward and to listen to the people who bring that diversity. Those folks should be leading the way. I'm really grateful for Harmony and the safe place that you provided even my own little family. Which brings me to my last question, but how does this kind of education help folks outside of the Church? So, we've really focused on Community of Christ, but how does educating ourselves on the queer community and the particulars of queer culture, and what it truly means for the society at large to be affirming? How does that help us in our quote/unquote, "secular life"?

Linda Stanbridge 59:26

Listening to you talk, Brittany, and it's made me think of this as well, that I saw a study a few days ago, and I wish I would have saved it. I'll see if I can find it again. It was talking about LGBTQ kids contemplating suicide, and the numbers last year were one in four. And so just let that sink in. One in four LGBTQ kids contemplated or attempted suicide last year, and they're not just in our churches. They're in our communities. Thinking about the percentage of the population, at least in the U.S., that identifies somewhere in the queer community, depends on what generation you're looking at, but it's like seven to 10%. And when we start talking about Gen Z, it's more like 20%. And some of that is, this is something that certainly you could talk about in your small groups, but people are like, oh, there's

more gay people now than there used to be. I don't think that's necessarily true, and that's a longer conversation to have some other time, so don't hear me saying that. But what I'm saying is there are really a lot of lives at stake when we're talking about 20% of the population Gen Z. Thinking about 25% of those kids struggling with wanting to be alive in the world with us. And so maybe it sounds dramatic to say lives are at stake, but I really don't think it is. A lot of the harm that comes to the queer community, whether it happens in a church building or not, is because of church people, because of the doctrine and the dogma that we spew all over politics, and our school boards and our town meetings. This is much more than just about our congregational lives. These are people in our communities. And I think it's very concerning. I think it's very concerning. And we have the framework. We have the good theology to back us up. We have a really healthy, scriptural understanding. I mean, it's wasteful, to have these amazing gifts, to have this ability to literally save lives and affirm people. Whether they come to our church doors ever or not, is not the point. It's to say that you are of worth, inestimable worth, we would say, right, that, whether they encounter our church community in some way or not, that we become transformed by this, and in turn, we transform our communities. And I think it's talking about very real people in our community and around us.

Parker Johnson 1:01:35

And to something Linda mentioned earlier about being culturally Christian, meaning we've just absorbed values wherever we are, if we're in a predominantly Christian nation. I remember during my coming out that the church was more progressive than my immediate society was. I grew up in a really rural area in Oklahoma, and what a gift that was. While I did think I was problematic within the church construct, I did not have to deal with eternal damnation conversations, or that I was just innately invalid as a person, or that I'd be better off dead. I am grateful that I never had to deal with that, because of the work that the church had already done to better understand biodiversity, understanding different experiences. But what a gift we could continue giving back if we can keep pushing that forward. And no matter where a child or even an adult going through a transition, and like, can say that, can say, "My church is not the problem here. It's what I'm facing in my immediate community." So, it does spill over, it does definitely spill over.

Brittany Mangelson 1:02:42

So, Linda and Parker, I know that I already said that I only had two questions, and then I asked you those two questions, but I actually have one more that I thought of as we were talking. So, we've talked a lot about where we've been as a denomination, where we're at, and then where we're going, and we haven't really necessarily named exactly where we're at or where we're going. And since I have two of the Harmony board members on right now, I just want to do kind of a reality check of where Community of Christ is at as far as global inclusion and affirmation of the queer community. So, I know that Harmony, in addition to this program, also has other things that you've been working on, policy updates, etc. So why don't you just share with us where Community of Christ is at right now.

Parker Johnson 1:03:28

As we've mentioned, there are various countries that have held national conferences, and we've also had multinational conferences, where it's also made sense in places like western Europe. Within those areas, the church, I believe western Europe is the only exception to this rule, all the other nations that held national conferences, their policies, that came out of those particular conference decisions, were

interim. So, within those policies were a two-year kind of deadline within that to say, we'll review and revise these within two years and ensure that they're still serving the church. I'm paraphrasing, but something along those lines. So, Harmony has been working with world church leaders to be able to ensure that we follow up on that commitment. The USA policy is the first that we've been working on with the USA team of apostles. I'm happy to share that that policy revisions should be updated by the end of this year, so by December 31, 2022. And we're really excited about the new framework that we proposed as Harmony to the apostles. It's a more affirming, shareable document, as I believe we've talked about this in past podcast recordings, but queer folks don't have a *Doctrine and Covenants* 156 like women do, that just shows this is a prophetic document leading us towards a certain direction of equality or more inclusion. And so, what we're trying to do is create a policy document that can also stand on its own two feet to become a welcoming document as well. So really excited to see what comes out of that. We'll see it at the end of the year when the Church puts that out, but really excited about that. And I do just kind of want to give a reality check of what that means. So, within the U.S., and then we'll be doing Canada next, by the way, while we are a fully affirming nation, there are some questions that still exist within that. And so, as far as we, Harmony, can tell in Community of Christ in the U.S., an openly queer person ordained could only really attain a certain level of leadership influence before they eventually hit sort of a ceiling, as we're calling it. And this is, as far as we can tell, this is because world church positions are representative of the global Church. And of course, within that, not all nations would have recognized or supported the ordination of the individual in the first place, if they're in an unaffirming nation. And, as most folks in Community of Christ know, ordination tends to be a prerequisite for a lot of leadership roles. So, we've asked leadership this. They've not confirmed nor denied the existence of what we're calling the queer ceiling. But the ambiguity is harmful, regardless, as we seek to support queer folks in their own journeys. So, we kind of need a roadmap to know how to avoid the landmines, especially the ones that we've laid. So, there's a lot of really great reasons to be hopeful and excited and positive about the future of the church in affirming nations, and in those nations that are seeking to become affirming. And at the same time, we still have so much more work to do, because there's just so much confusion about how to navigate the Church when we're talking about a global denomination, and suddenly only the national structure has allowed, I'll just use myself as an example, me the right to fully participate. So, at a certain point, do I hit the U.S. or the Canadian max that I can do? How do I be more representative of the global church? I don't know. I don't have answers to those questions. So, I shouldn't say that we're fully affirming, because I don't know that for sure. But I haven't gotten confirmation from leadership about what that could look like. I know that there's some legislation coming up at World Conference that might be able to assist with a bit more of a flexible understanding and definition of certain criteria. But I'm not quite sure. But I didn't want to end to be like a Debbie Downer here, but I also just want to have a reality check to say, we're doing great stuff. We've made a lot of headway. We're doing amazing, phenomenal things in the area of queer inclusion and we still don't know some things. And if I'm being completely frank, I think the church doesn't know either, because we kind of set into motion this more fractured approach with national conferences and multinational conferences, which is allowing the church to move forward in so many other places, but it's creating this certain inequality within the church of different lived experiences. So, we're really trying to get some clarification on that so that we can provide people within the queer community more guidance about how to navigate this church that we all love.

Brittany Mangelson 1:07:55

I think that's really, really important and exactly what I was hoping to gain understanding of with that question. Okay, we've talked about how important it is for communities to do the work, so where exactly is Community of Christ right now? So, I'm grateful, Parker, that you were able to give that honest, frank reflection, because I do think that the lived experience of someone like me, who's a straight, white, heterosexual, cis woman, is going to look very different if you are a queer person of any variety within the church. And recognizing that and acknowledging that tension exists, and then trying to figure out how we can move forward and move through that tension, where we're all just accepted as humans, I think is the ultimate goal. And I really admire Harmony for your persistent efforts in trying to get those clarifications and working this out. So, thank you for that. Thanks for that extra bonus question at the end. And then a surprise, there's one more bonus question. I always like to leave these interviews just with, is there anything else that you would like to share? I first just want to really thank you both for taking this time to explain the progress that has been made and where we're at today and where we're going. And I hope that congregations, and mission centers, and groups, emerging new expressions, everyone in between, take this opportunity to really analyze your own ministries and see where maybe your gaps are, and then how you can be involved in furthering queer inclusion within Community of Christ. So, thank you so much for sharing. And then also, do you have any final thoughts that you just are eager to get out, before we end?

Linda Stanbridge 1:09:42

One of our other biggest programs is Sacred Pause, which is our monthly gathering. It happens generally on the last Monday of the month, except we do not typically meet in the month of December, but otherwise, it's the last Monday of every month and it's open to queer folks and allies. And we gather every month to kind of explore our spirituality together, to connect, to worship, to talk about topics that are really specific to the queer perspective. So, everyone is more than welcome to join us during that time. If you're wanting to learn a little bit more about what Harmony is on a human level, that's a really great way to connect with us. And again, everybody's welcome. We'd love to have you there whether you're considering this program, or whether you're not. It's an awesome way to just get connected with what Harmony is doing and kind of stay up to date with what we're up to.

Brittany Mangelson 1:10:28

Thanks so much. And Parker?

Parker Johnson 1:10:30

We've dumped a lot of information on folks, so I guess I just want to make myself available. If there are any questions, feel free to contact us at info@harmony.lgbt. We would be happy to answer any questions or send you the same resources that we discussed here on the podcast. And I just want to thank Brittany and *Project Zion Podcast* team for giving us this time and space to share a little bit about this program. That means a lot to us and that is making a big difference. So, thanks so much.

Linda Stanbridge 1:10:57

Yeah, thank you so much for having us and being such a great supporter.

Brittany Mangelson 1:11:01

No, absolutely. And I think that the work that you're doing in the Church is invaluable and so, I'm more than happy to give you a little podcast, so. And I just want to say to our listeners, we will be sure to have the Harmony website and email addresses and the, what did you call it?

Parker Johnson 1:11:17

Request More Information Form link will be in there and that's how you would be able to initiate getting started with the Welcoming and Affirming Program. Yep.

Brittany Mangelson 1:11:25

Absolutely. We're gonna have that in the show notes as well. Okay, this has been "What's Brewing" for *Project Zion Podcast* and thank you for listening. Have a great day.

Josh Mangelson 1:11:42

Thanks for listening to Project Zion Podcast. Project Zion Podcast is a Ministry of Community of Christ. The views and opinions expressed in this episode are those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Community of Christ. The music has been graciously provided by Dave Heinze