

Episode-207|Harmony|Jerry Dale Jr and Parker Johnson

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SPEAKERS

Josh Mangelson, Jerry Dale, 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, and welcome to another episode of Project Zion Podcast. This is Brittany and I will be your host for today. I am going to be bringing you an interview with two of my very most favorite people, Parker Johnson and Jerry M. Dale, Jr. This is going to be part two in the series that we have featuring the organization Harmony. So, the last episode that we did was the history of GALA. And then today we're gonna be talking about Harmony. I'm really excited to have these guys on today. I'm gonna throw it over to them to introduce themselves a little bit. So Parker, why don't you tell us who you are and where you're at and just a little bit and then we'll turn it on over to Jerry for a similar introduction.

Parker Johnson 01:18

Sure. Hey, everybody. My name is Parker Johnson. I live and work in Calgary, Alberta, Canada for Community of Christ, Canada West Mission Center. I'm a lifelong member of Community of Christ and on the Board of Harmony.

Jerry Dale 01:31

Everyone, this is Jerry Dale Jr. and I'm the current president of Harmony. I'm really glad to be on my first Project Zion Podcast. I am excited for the podcast to really talk about what we're doing with Harmony, and our vision forward. I've been a lifelong member of Community of Christ, originally from Stillwater, Oklahoma, and have lived in Washington DC for over 20 years now.

Brittany Mangelson 02:01

Awesome. Thank you. So, let's just start at the beginning and the basics. What is Harmony? What are we talking about when we talk about Harmony?

Jerry Dale 02:13

This is Jerry. Harmony is the new name for the recently merged GALA (Gay And Lesbian Acceptance) and the organization WCN (the Welcoming Community Network). Harmony's mission is to provide advocacy, education and resources for queer voices in Community of Christ with a vision of full participation.

Brittany Mangelson 02:39

Let's talk about the word "queer" a little bit. I know that it has an intense history, in the church and outside of the church. Parker, do you want to walk us through a little bit about why the word queer is used in this context?

Parker Johnson 02:54

Sure, as you said, the word queer has definitely been a contentious topic and it's still one. There's not one sense of 100% adoption across the LGBTQ acronym. The word queer, we went back and forth on this, as we were discussing the new mission of the organization. We really felt that queer was actually more inclusive, more welcoming, and more all-encompassing than what we would be locked into with an acronym. As time has gone on, the acronym has grown. We don't want to leave anybody out. We don't want to have a plus sign representing anyone. We really felt that this word, however contentious and highly debated as it is, actually is has a lot of value, in this case. I'm going to quote from an asterisk on our mission statement. I'd like to quote here as it does a better job explaining our why behind it. The term queer is being reclaimed by some who identify as LGBTQ+, and is used as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community. We use the phrase "queer voices" to describe all persons regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, who have the courage to use their voice to speak for justice for the marginalized in the queer community. At the very least, it's a great educational tool for us. I know, whenever we had our booth at World Conference, it was one of the most frequently asked questions and it was a great kind of foray into issues that the community deals with. You may have noticed in that little quote that I just read, it also includes straight allies. That's a really important piece, as well. We heard feedback from people that when we had the GALA name straight allies didn't feel like it was an organization they could join because they felt like it wasn't their place to be in that organization. The culture that Harmony wants to foster is one of collaboration. One of full inclusion. And that includes everyone.

Jerry Dale 05:04

I'd also like to add to that, and Parker, thanks for doing that, queer, in the older generation, my generation and older, I'm 45, so 45 and older, it really was used as a pejorative for many, many years. So, it's interesting that the younger generation is having a hard time wrapping their mind around why would there be all of this challenge around the word queer. It was really interesting. I had a conversation with somebody one time, and we were able to draw the link between other pejoratives in the community, like the word faggot to the word queer. Once we understood the power in the word, it helped them be able to have a broader understanding of why people were having those reactions. So, the mission and purpose of Harmony really is for radical inclusion. If you have ever been harmed by that word queer, I want to sincerely apologize to you for that. It is not our intent to cause harm, or cause pain. It is our intent to be as inclusive as we can in this really challenging world when we've got so many letters being added to that acronym.

Brittany Mangelson 06:29

Yeah, thank you for that, both of you. It's been important for me to just listen to as many of the perspectives as I can about the word before I use it. And I know that some people only identify as queer and then other people are very offended by it. I understand that it's a thin line to walk, but I appreciate the asterisk that you read Parker, the description, and your further explanation of why you went with the word. So, thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Let's talk about the merger, the need for GALA and WCN to merge, and then how did that happen? and what did that process look like?

Jerry Dale 07:13

So, I'll take that question. The idea of the merger started in about 2015. I've been involved with GALA since I came out of the closet, so 25 years now, and I really began to understand that our little denomination really could not sustain two separate LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations. That's two boards of directors going for the same type of membership. By combining our efforts, we're really able to become more laserlike focused on the issues that we're being faced with today, so that we could ultimately do more good together than we could apart.

Brittany Mangelson 08:04

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to join forces when we are a small denomination, and then when it's a group within a small group within a small denomination, it would make sense that you would combine and accomplish more.

Jerry Dale 08:20

Yeah, and what's great about the welcoming community network vision is to work interdenominationally. The welcoming community network is a member in a much larger welcoming church movement. We're able to work at that larger ecumenical level to help move the needle of acceptance together with other denominations, more than we can individually. We're going to be continuing that engagement as we continue in Harmony.

Brittany Mangelson 09:03

Yeah, I think that's really, really important. Okay, so now we know the why that the merger needed to happen. So, what did that process actually look like? What kind of work was involved there?

Jerry Dale 09:17

The merge process, it was the first time I'd ever gone through any kind of merger like that. It wound up being hundreds of hours to effect this merger with discussions on the requirements of the merger, who would merge into who, and the different resources that we're going to need. We had to do a major revision to our bylaws to bring them up to current standards because they hadn't been revised since the 80s. There were formal votes of the membership and congregations because we're going from WCN not being a member organization into GALA, which is a member organization, legal filings, state of Missouri filings because we're incorporated in the state of Missouri. The laundry list of things just went on and on and on. One of the requirements of the merger was an agreement to do a rebranding. Legally, WCN merged into GALA, and WCN dissolved, but that didn't feel very welcoming to keep the same name. So, what we wound up doing is agreeing to do a rebranding, to combine both organizations under a new name and a new brand. Parker led the whole rebrand effort. He was our resident expert on that. I'll let him talk a little bit more about the rebranding.

Parker Johnson 10:58

Sure, yeah. So um, back in September of last year, so 2018, at the GALA retreat, I presented a seven-step process to get us from GALA/WCN, middle of the merger, to a final product, a new brand. We closely followed that actually. We never deviated from the seven steps that we'd given the membership there. It really was important to all of the leadership that transparency was at the center of everything. We wanted to over communicate. We wanted to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to give feedback. There were various stages of the of the rebranding process that, at the beginning, for example, it didn't matter if you were a paid member or not. I wanted your feedback to answer some general questions about how you perceive the organization, what you hoped for the organization, ask some historical questions about, past ideas, and maybe values of the organization. Those types of things. Then we would progress slowly into the point where it was a members-only question because we were starting to make changes. There was a discovery phase where we're getting general feedback. We did a request for proposals at that point to bring in a branding agency. We felt really strongly that a third party needed to be overseeing this professional design because I didn't want any bias, especially because we were bringing in two groups. That was a really positive experience for us. I don't want to speak for Jerry, but I know it felt really nice having someone hold our hands to this entire process that had great feedback and a professional outlook on how to do the training to do this. As we moved forward, there were formal votes. We engaged the branding agency with all the data that we've been given from members, non-members. It really propelled us into a place where I think both Jerry and I, and everyone on the rebranding committee would go a little while and then we'd realize, nope, I don't feel comfortable making this decision until we ask membership more questions about this. So, you know, for every question that we'd get from the designer, we'd generally have really good feedback already from the membership to answer most of those questions. But we would always hit a point where I felt like I hit the end of my leash and I would call Jerry and say, I think we need to get on another zoom call because I don't feel like I should be the one making this decision without membership feedback. And so ,we did. We had lots of surveys. Our core membership probably got blasted with emails, especially towards the end with really quite a few surveys, but they had really important questions. And then that helped us get to a really great final product

Jerry Dale 13:46

There was a survey every week or two to the entire membership. And what was incredible about that is the more we communicated about this rebranding, the more energized our membership became and the more members we got as a result. It's just been such a great spectrum of feedback that we received to help ensure that we took the right steps in this brand.

Parker Johnson 14:13

Definitely. So, in the end, we finished on time, we launched our new brand, publicly, at World Conference, which was a wonderful way to start bridging the gap between GALA/WCN and answering those questions from people in the church who recognized GALA and WCN, but who is this Harmony and where is GALA and WCN? We had a great time at the booth fielding some of those questions and answering folks' questions about what the future might look like as we move forward. We finished on time, and I have to say on budget. I'm really proud of that. The process ran from September through

April and most of the work happened between January and April. But I'm really proud of the final results.

Brittany Mangelson 15:06

Yeah, that sounds like it took an extreme amount of work, but you went through it with a large amount of intentionality. I really appreciate that you got feedback from not only members, but friends from the organization and then whittled down to a group that was going to be engaged long term. That's really impressive. That's a lot of effort. Okay, so what are some of the key issues that Harmony is planning to address going forward?

Parker Johnson 15:41

It's a really good question. We've spent the last well the better part of the year really working on administrative tasks that are integral before we can move on to these next few questions. We've arrived at this point. It's a very pertinent question. Now that we're done with the merger, and the rebrand, we're really looking towards programming and how we can ensure that our members gain a lot of value from their affiliation with Harmony. We're in this phase right now, where, you know, as we already discussed with the rebrand, we need feedback. We've been asking members and friends in the organization for ideas on what are some things that we can do that would really maximize the value of being a member. We're still in that phase. So, for all you listeners out there, if you have any ideas for us, we are certainly open to hearing your suggestions. We definitely see ourselves as advocating, as educating and providing resources, just as Jerry mentioned in our mission statement. Those are our three focus areas, advocacy, education, and resources. Within that, there's a lot of wiggle room that we can really put together some valuable stuff. My biggest thing is that I want to make sure that our members are proud to be affiliated with Harmony, and that we are seen as a respectful, loving, welcoming community that people can come and be part of, and help progress, not only themselves and the organization forward, but also with our church, Community of Christ as a denomination, moving forward. Our focus, as we move forward is trying to figure out what do our members need? What does the church need? And how can we support that?

Brittany Mangelson 17:34

So, Parker, if people want to get in contact with you, or if they want to help, or have their voice heard, where would you direct them?

Parker Johnson 17:42

Sure, you can email us, that'd be the best way of doing it. Our email address is info, info@Harmony.LGBT.

Brittany Mangelson 17:52

Awesome. And yeah, we'll be sure to have that listed in the show notes with this podcast. So, thank you.

Jerry Dale 18:04

Some exciting news coming hot off the presses, Harmony will be announcing our nominations process for the board of directors and officers in the coming weeks. Now, in order to be on the board, you need

to be a member of the organization. If you have joined, or would like to join, or want more information about the nominations process, check out our website, [Harmony.LGBT](https://www.harmony.lgbt), for more information.

Brittany Mangelson 18:34

What else does Harmony have going on throughout the rest of the year?

Jerry Dale 18:39

In addition to nominations for the board, Harmony has been invited to participate at Spectacular this year. For those that don't know, Spectacular, is the youth camp to be at of all youth camps for high school aged kids in Community of Christ. It's held every year at our university in Lamoni, Iowa. This year, the special guest class is where I'll be presenting some information about Harmony on Tuesday of camp at 10am and 11am. This class is hosted by one of the First presidents, Stassi Cramm. It'll be a really great opportunity for us to share together about what does it mean to be LGBTQ+, or queer, in Community of Christ. I'm excited about that opportunity to continue to get the word out about what we're doing.

Brittany Mangelson 19:44

That's really awesome. I love that your class at Spec is going to be hosted or facilitated with Stassi Cramm, who's a member of the First Presidency. I think having World Church leadership give the support that they have, you know, in addition to many, many others, is really significant, and something that I get really excited about when I think of the future of, not only Harmony, but the church, and that relationship between Harmony and the church, which brings me to my next question. What do you anticipate the relationship to be between Harmony and the church going forward? What do you hope that looks like as we walk together into the future? So, Parker, do you want to take that one?

Parker Johnson 20:32

Yeah. I hope that our relationship with Community of Christ continues to be one that is respectful and collaborative and that seeks to envision an even more inclusive future in our denomination. We've seen incredible amounts of support from church members and church leaders in various capacities since we've launched into this merger and rebranding process. At conference this year, we had a Wednesday night worship service where we had several apostles serving communion to those who were in attendance. I think we had over 100 people there that were in attendance. It was a really meaningful service to see the representation of church members, leaders, and everyone there together, just connecting and being vulnerable together. Stories were shared and then communion, of course, was shared, and it was just a really impactful service for everyone who was there.

Jerry Dale 21:29

Yeah, I will have to agree. I heard many times that was one of the highlights of World Conference for some people, the Harmony worship service. It is something worth seeing if you've never been to one of our services.

Parker Johnson 21:47

Yeah, definitely, I heard lots of positive things for sure, as well. In Community of Christ, for those who don't know, the church has tackled the issue of LGBT issues in the church on a country-by-country

basis. So, there's lots of work to be done. There are seven countries that have now gone through this process, as they seek to become affirming. But as we work within those seven countries and more countries that have yet to meet and decide to do such a thing, there's going to be conflict, there's going to be disagreements, but the key thing here is to remember that we're all people and that we have stories to share. One of the cornerstones of GALA and WCN has always been sharing stories and the impact that you can have simply by sharing your story with one person. As long as we can communicate with honesty and integrity, and from a place of the greater good, I can see our relationship only strengthening going forward.

Brittany Mangelson 22:46

So, Parker, I know that the LGBTQ+ community does not always agree on terms and definitions or even culture. Since you kind of brought up conflict and things like that, and working together, are there any ways that Harmony is planning on working together to bring everyone into harmony, like your name suggests?

Parker Johnson 23:14

Yeah, good question. I mean, I think oftentimes, in music, there's going to be dissonance in harmony. And there's lots of different expressions that make up the whole. So it's something that I feel strongly that if we can work together, in a collaborative way, to listen to one another, to risk something new, we can really learn something from one another. It's not always going to be without a messy conversation, or uncomfortable moments, but that's just that's just the reality. I find that sometimes out of the most uncomfortable conversations, if I can just force myself to sit in the discomfort and ask myself, why am I not comfortable right now, I can learn a great deal. And I think, you know, it's a struggle that I continue to work on, in my life, and in my church work, and also in my work with Harmony. But it's something that always pays back in dividends.

Jerry Dale 24:06

I really think that makes life so beautiful, whenever we're sitting in that uncomfortable space. So, you know, I've learned a lot as we're going through this, sitting with people who disagree with me or sitting, thinking about things in different ways. I really have come to appreciate the dissonance with the harmony, and how does that relates to this name. I think there's just so much opportunity here.

Brittany Mangelson 24:38

When I think of the LGBTQA+ community, the queer community, how diverse it is, I think sometimes people on the outside just assume that it's all the same, the culture is the same, or the relationship with what we typically think is like a traditional heterosexual society, that we assume that everyone in a marginalized group interacts with the majority in the same way, but really, the LGBTQ community, it intersects with class . . . I mean, there's different levels of marginalization when it comes to the community. I think that's important to take in consideration when you're talking about having harmony and this idea that some words may have been used for harm, or some members of the LGBTQ community have an 'easier time,' passing for being straight, or cisgender, or whatever it may be. So yeah, the diversity in the community can't be overstated. I think that the name Harmony is really beautiful. Again, Harmony is not necessarily unison, where everyone is singing the same note, but that it's different notes working together to make the whole beautiful.

Jerry Dale 26:11

I really appreciate you saying that, because as we were working to design the logo, we asked people, what do you see? What do you see in the logo? We were really conscious about the color palette that we chose for the logo. If you look at one of the electronic versions, and you zoom in, you'll notice it's a color wheel behind. I've learned that any one person is any of one color. Each person is more than one thing. There is dimensionality and intersectionality in each of us. That's one of the greatest things that I've been able to take from the logo of Harmony and apply to my own life. My own thinking is, how can I, as a cisgender, gay, white male, who prefers gender neutral pronouns relate with a transgender asexual person who prefers feminine pronouns? How does all of that intersect? What does that mean? How can we create a safe space for everybody at the table in the best way that we know how? Until we can really stop and listen to each other's stories, have the courage to ask the questions, have the ability to be vulnerable with each other and truly listen to each other, protect each other's worth, when we get to that point, I think the world is just going to be a much better place.

Brittany Mangelson 28:01

Yeah, I agree. So, Jerry, like I mentioned in the intro of this podcast, we've already heard from some of the founding members of GALA, and WCN, and learned more about the history of those two organizations. I'm wondering how Harmony plans to carry that legacy forward into the new organization, Harmony.

Jerry Dale 28:28

We have given a lot of thought about our legacy, and how we move forward in a way that honors our legacy. We would not be where we are today, had it not been for the giants that came before us. So, Bob Swofford, who is our founder, Arthur Butler, Ginger Farley, and so many other leaders, both living and for those that have passed on, they really did lay a great groundwork and built some great structures that we're building on to. As we redesign our membership program, we're going to be looking at our history to really drive our future. In addition, WCN gave us great structure for a congregation support program. What we're looking at doing is revising that in a way that is more relevant for our congregations today. For the congregations that have completed the program in the past, how do we provide continuing education or make it relevant to them the year after they complete the program and begin looking at what resources do we need to support that. So again, advocacy, education, resources, and all of the programs is what we're really trying to look to do. So, becoming a member, not only helps us shape these programs, but it also will help us develop new programs. and your voices really matter in what we're trying to accomplish. We really do want to encourage people to go to our website and take a look at what we're doing and join us if that's something that you want to do.

Parker Johnson 30:16

I should also point out that joining a membership organization also gives you a whole bunch of intangible benefits. One of those is the idea of joining a community. We will be developing resources and tools as an organization for our membership, but on top of that, you are going to be joining into a community of like-minded individuals who may not all be on the same point on a path, but who are looking towards the future for a better tomorrow. You know, have at it, make up your own sub-committees, and sub-sub-sub committees of people who are looking to foster change and development

in the church and in our organization. That's just a huge added benefit that I think that we don't often really speak to specifically, but it's one that I think is potentially the most valuable of joining any membership organization.

Jerry Dale 31:07

Well, I think to tag on to that, Parker, our membership is probably one of the most diverse that we've had in recent history. We have over 140 members in 23 states, three provinces, and a total of, I believe, eight countries now around the world. If you're traveling the world, there's the opportunity to connect with somebody from Harmony. There's so many great potential, so much great potential for us as an organization.

Brittany Mangelson 31:48

That's really amazing. Those are, those are really awesome numbers, as far as membership, and then how diverse they are in geographical location. What can you tell us about the Board of Directors? What's the diversity like there?

Jerry Dale 32:07

Our board has been one of the most diverse in our recent history, as well. Now, diversity comes in many different forms. We have people who identify as gay or lesbian, we have non-binary, we have asexual, we have men, we have women, we have all over the place of diversity, which is great and we're always looking for more. If you don't feel that you're represented, or if you feel that you could bring something to the table, we would love to ask you to submit your name to be nominated for the board.

Brittany Mangelson 33:02

Yeah, Jerry, and that diversity on the board sounds really important, too. If you have a board of directors that actually reflects the organization, I think that's a sign of a healthy organization. I really appreciate that. So, I guess with the membership then, what do you hope that they gain from being involved with Harmony, being a part of this Harmony community?

Parker Johnson 33:31

I'm really glad that you said community because it goes back to what I was saying earlier, this is first and foremost a community. What we hope as a Board as leaders, and as fellow members of Harmony is that others who join the organization feel like they have a place to call home, that they are fully accepted as they are.

Jerry Dale 33:53

What I really hope for our membership is a place where we could be true advocates for each other, and in the church. Advocacy has always been part of our history. It will continue into the foreseeable future. Advocacy is so very important. Our mission says advocacy, education, and resources. My hope is that all of these things really help engage us more into the enduring principles and mission of Community of Christ, and sharing more broadly what Community of Christ is about in the LGBTQ queer community.

Parker Johnson 34:42

From an educational standpoint, I think for our membership, learning how to become a voice for the marginalized is huge, where you can tell your own story, but telling others who are in positions of power that you're trying to advocate for others, as well, is something that requires education. You have to talk to people who are impacted by different scenarios, policies, and circumstances so that you can feel more aware, able to effectuate positive change, not to speak for them, but in the event that they are not there, that you can actually attempt to represent their best interest. I also think it's important to note that the leadership team can't come up with nor should be expected to come up with every single membership gain for the organization. I only know how to see life through my lens. And I need other people to tell me their stories so that I can become more aware. They can explain to me what Harmony should be pushing for, what Harmony should be standing up for. While we're coming up with some of these responses to what our hopes and dreams are for membership in the organization, that's all well and good, but it doesn't just stop here. There's lots of room for growth.

Jerry Dale 36:01

What I hear Parker saying there, is for people to be courageous in their voice, to really speak out and share what is it that that we need to do to help. I think one of my other hopes is for people to have the courage to speak out, to step out of their personal closets, whether it be as an ally, or as an LGBTQ+ person, or any other ways that people can step out of their closets. Allies have an important closet to step out of in congregations and saying, Hey, we want to be part of something bigger. We want to share our inclusive and affirming policies within the larger LGBTQ community. We all have a great story to tell. This denomination has come light years, over the last decade or two, in learning what it means to be the worth of all persons, to know what it means to be a prophetic people. It's my hope that that we continue to have the courage to speak our truth and as the mission prayer says, to risk something.

Brittany Mangelson 37:30

I think that's really beautiful. I think I've said, it's really inspiring to have an organization go through, have a community go through what they've gone through within the church, and then to come out and be in this place at this time, with a lot of work ahead of them, but with a drive and a determination and a community that supports that. That's really exciting for me. I guess wrapping this up, is there anything else that you two, would like to leave us with?

Parker Johnson 38:08

So, earlier, I'd mentioned that we're looking for feedback, suggestions, input from members and non-members alike, for the direction of the organization. If you feel like you have a really great idea on something that falls into the categories of advocacy, education, and resources, we are really keen on hearing your ideas. Send those ideas to us at info@Harmony.LGBT.

Brittany Mangelson 38:35

Yeah, awesome. We will for sure, put those links and the email and all that in the show notes so our listeners can easily find them. So thank you guys, I really appreciate you coming on today and helping the church and seekers understand a little bit more about Harmony. So I'm really looking forward to seeing where it takes everybody in, where it takes the church.

Parker Johnson 38:59

Thanks for having us.

Jerry Dale 39:02

Yeah. Thanks so much for having us, Brittany. It was great to have you on the board of GALA and Harmony as we were going through this transition. I see so much promise for the future.

Brittany Mangelson 39:17

Yeah, it's really exciting.

Josh Mangelson 39:27

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