What's Brewing|Faith Based Organizing

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SPEAKERS

Carla Long, Emily Rose

Carla Long 00:26

Hello, and welcome to the *Project Zion Podcast*. I'm your host, Carla Long, and today I'm with a dear, dear friend, Emily Rose. Hi, Emily.

Emily Rose 00:35 Hi, Carla.

Carla Long 00:36

It's so good to have you here. I love talking with you. Emily is, well, I'm just gonna say it. She's an inspiration to me. When I talk to her, I just always feel so inspired and uplifted and ready to go and tackle all the problems of the world. And I hope that's how you feel after you hear this podcast. So, before we jump into exactly what we're going to do, Emily, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

Emily Rose 01:02

Yeah, so my name is Emily, and I live in Independence, Missouri, with my husband, Daniel Harmon, and our nine month-old son, Oliver, who I love. He's been such a great blessing and adventure and just joy these last nine months. And yeah, so that's just kind of some personal details. But professionally, I work for Community of Christ as a Peace and Justice Minister, remote for the Sierra Pacific Mission Center, so that's the Northern California area, and that's a relatively new thing in my life. And so far, I'm loving it and really excited about all the opportunities.

Carla Long 01:37

Awesome. Thanks, Emily. So, you and I were talking about something called faith-rooted organizing, and I think I know what that means, but maybe you could fill in some gaps for me. So, my very, very first big question is, what is faith-rooted organizing?

Emily Rose 01:54

I first came into this concept of faith-rooted organizing when I was working for Community of Christ in southern California as an Invitation Support Minister, and we partnered with an organization called CLUE, and that's actually an acronym that stands for Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, and it was this wonderful organization. It was kind of into community organizing, but their model and word that they use is faith-rooted organizing. And what they did is they leveraged the moral and spiritual

authority of faith leaders and faith members to walk alongside unions as they sought better conditions and pay for workers, and they did that a number of different ways. But really, what they proposed, as the faith-rooted organizing model, is to bring the gifts of faith to what would normally be traditional community organizing. So, what do we mean by that? People of faith bring all kinds of gifts. We bring music and hymnody. We bring story and imagery. We have symbols that hold meaning. Honestly, we have hope for God's future that is a real source of energy. And faith-rooted organizing seeks to pair those gifts with the really important work that is being done for social justice, particularly in this context, with community organizing around labor and economic justice. So, it really sought to bring faith into that conversation. And it was an interfaith and an ecumenical experience, and, yeah. It was a really powerful thing, and so, it got me excited. I'm my happiest Community of Christ member in an ecumenical setting where we're partnered with people from all kinds of background. I get really excited about that.

Carla Long 03:47

That is fascinating stuff. That's really awesome stuff to hear. How many people were involved with CLUE when you were in southern California? How many people, or how many churches?

Emily Rose 03:56

Oh, sure. You know, there were probably dozens of different denominations and congregations that would gather once a month. The meetings were really important. So, the way they were structured is they would actually try to center the voices and experiences of the people who were perhaps experiencing injustice. So, one of the phrases they would like to say is that, "People closest to the pain should be closest to the power." And we really tried to structure how we gathered that way. So, they would invite workers, say at Disneyland. They stood alongside hotel workers at Disneyland to try and improve hours and wages. And they would invite workers to come and speak to faith leaders and build relationship and get to know them. So, what was powerful about that is that you begin to know people's stories and to recognize that there are hotel workers at fancy places in southern California who have spent decades dedicated to those jobs, and really are in conditions that are not safe and not practical and don't pay enough to survive in southern California. And so, the power came in those conversations, because then, all of a sudden, you have these faith leaders who are committed to better conditions for people that they've met. And that meant that they would call on the phone to management or sometimes show up at picket lines, or offer support in all kinds of ways. It radically shaped how I thought of ministry to have that experience.

Carla Long 05:25

That is awesome to hear. That's really awesome to hear. One thing that I've always said about churches, even though, you know, you hear how awful churches are all the time, and how theologies have hurt people, and I know that's true, but what churches do have is community and you can find support in that community. You can hear other people's stories in that community. If I weren't part of a church, then I might never talk to someone of a different socio-economic level than me that, because, you know, you usually just hang out with the people who agree with you, who look like you, who dress like you, who act like you. And church is kind of this place that you get to see a whole bunch of different people and you get to think, wow, people really do live different lives than I do, and to understand that that's okay too. So that community aspect, I think, is extremely important, eye opening.

Emily Rose 06:15

Yeah, it was really powerful. And I do think that, you know, it's easy. Faith holds a lot of baggage, and at its worst, I think it can be used to abuse, and at its best, it's used to liberate, and that's what I try to stay near is how is my faith is calling me to liberation for other people, and what am I going to do about that?

Carla Long 06:34

That's just beautiful. That is always something to aspire to. How can my faith help to liberate people? I don't know if you want to jump into the Community of Christ stuff yet, but I am really curious about, how do you see Community of Christ getting involved with peace and justice activities, especially with your background in this faith-rooted organizing?

Emily Rose 06:52

Community of Christ has so much to offer. I can get really excited. First of all, I think our theology is just so poised with our focus on peace and this idea that God is at work in the world now. I've always been really enamored with our Enduring Principle of Continuing Revelation. It really feels tangible, that God is calling us and speaking to us, and at work in the world, and inviting us to be co-creators in that. And so, I think our theology sets us up, well. Our Enduring Principles set us up well. My two favorite Enduring Principles are probably the Sacredness of Creation and the Worth of All Persons. There's so much richness there that, if we take it seriously, our faith does call us into that liberating peace and justice work. We're poised just by who we are, and what we believe. And I also think we're poised with some of the things that we may consider to be detriments. So, I think sometimes we have a lack of selfconfidence, perhaps, based on our size, and based on our numbers, but I think that there's some real power in having a small group of people punch above our weight. That's what we used to say in our southern Utah congregation where we had maybe a dozen people, but we were able to accomplish guite a lot because we didn't have 1000 committees to work through, and like lots of the red tape that accompanies a really big congregation, where it's just a group of people at a table who want to make the world better. So, I think there's some real gifts of our smallness. And I also, I think, sometimes we, we get worried that our population is aging, and we don't have enough young people, and we see that as a scarcity. But I really do think that there are gifts in having our members who may be retired and have time to jump in with some of the things that faith-rooted organizing asks us to do. So, there are people who have the time to get on the phone with management and call on behalf of hotel workers or on behalf of airport workers, and really get engaged with organizations that are already doing fabulous work, as opposed to reinventing the wheel and thinking we have to do all of that ourselves. We actually have people who may have the time to live out their faith, and do peace and justice work alongside others who are already at work. There's a lot of things to be jazzed about.

Carla Long 09:28

There are a lot of things to be jazzed about. I really love that you've talked about sometimes people think that it's really the young people who need to change the world, right? Older people are not willing to do that. Maybe they don't have the energy to do that. Maybe they don't want to do that. But what you're saying is that we desperately need people of all ages...

Emily Rose 09:48 Yes.

Carla Long 09:49 ...to jump in and do this.

Emily Rose 09:50 Yes.

Carla Long 09:51

No one's too old and no one's too young in order to make those phone calls or write those letters or do those things that you are talking about.

Emily Rose 09:58

There's real beauty in intergenerational relationships. I don't really want to attend a young adult thing. I don't want to go to a pizza party, just for people that are my age. I really want to have relationships with people who have had all kinds of life experience and who are at different phases in their life. I'm a new parent. I want to talk to grandparents.

Carla Long 10:18 I totally get that as a parent myself.

Emily Rose 10:20 Yes.

Carla Long 10:21 Do you just want to play with my kid?

Emily Rose 10:23 Yeah. That sounds great.

Carla Long 10:25

I totally get that. Sometimes just the problems seem really, really big. Sometimes everything just seems too big to handle. And to be perfectly honest, and vulnerable, it just makes me freeze. Like, I just don't do anything because it feels like what I do doesn't matter. It feels like I don't know what to do. I can do what I can, but that's all I can do. And I just have no more time and energy to even think about other things. What are some things that individuals or congregations can do right now to help, either the, whatever problems we're talking about? What are just some things we can do?

Emily Rose 11:01

Oh, goodness, there's lots of things. I'll talk a little bit about some of the things that I'm involved with in Sierra Pacific, and hopefully that will inspire some of our congregations to experiment and see what's possible. So, the first thing I'll talk about, we have kind of a peace and justice, it started out as an anti-racist reading circle called Love Out Loud, and it has gone through the pandemic all the way until now.

There's a group of folks who have been hopping on Zoom and reading books about peace and justice. and talking about them together, really investing ourselves in the learning, and it's fabulous. And we try to meet at a fairly decent time for folks to hop in across time zones. It starts at 6:30 Pacific time, so if you're on the east coast, it does start a little late. I will say my mom loves this group, bless her heart. She moved one time zone over, and so now it starts at 9:30, and it's tough for her, but anyone is invited. It is on Zoom. So, if you're interested, we're starting a new book and focusing on the Sacredness of Creation. So, we're going to be reading Barbara Kingsolver's Animal, Vegetable, *Miracle*, and it goes through a year of their family deciding to live on food that is just local, so eating food that has been produced locally and not traveled so far to come to them. That's one thing that you can do is you can invest yourself in learning the things that you don't know about peace and justice, and that helps you to engage with the world differently. The other thing, I really empathize with you, that feeling of feeling paralyzed, and like the enormity of things is just really big. And the topic for me that that triggers a lot is climate change. That's where it just feels impossible. And so, I want to share a documentary that I watched, and you actually mentioned that you watched it, too. It's on Netflix. It's called "Kiss the Ground", and the way I describe it to people is it's the most hopeful I have ever felt about climate change, and it feels really tangible. What it talks about is how our agricultural system, so the way we tend the soil, and the way we grow our food, and the way our animals participate with that system, is degenerative, so it's eroding our soil and our topsoil is really, really important. And there are ways of farming that are actually regenerative, so they build up our topsoil. And not only that, they pull carbon dioxide out of the air to the point that if we were to, on a large scale, lean into regenerative agriculture, we could draw down so much carbon that we would actually see a reversal of climate change, so we would see cooling within the next few decades. So that kind of learning makes me really hopeful and I get really excited. What's really important is that we are living in a time where there's like this pivotal moment, right? The farm bill is being voted on this year. This is a farm bill in the United States year. So, every five years, we reassess how we fund, basically, our entire food system. And now is a time when we could push for regenerative agriculture, like what's described in "Kiss the Gound", that could legitimately help combat climate change in a really meaningful way. I say all of that because Community of Christ has this Enduring Principle of the Sacredness of Creation, and when we take that really seriously, it means pushing for policy and civic engagement rooted in faith position. So, my faith compels me to see the soil as sacred, and to see our relationship with the earth as sacred, and our relationship with each other as all woven together. That is a very theological idea in my mind and it compels me to want to protect it. And this is one way to do that, to really engage in our civic body and push for policies that support regenerative agriculture. There's lots of ways to do that. You can organize with your congregation and maybe meet with your representative. You can sign a petition I could link to in the show notes if that's something of interest for you. You can come to a peace colloguy that we are planning in Sierra Pacific. So, it's the Redwoods Peace Colloguy and our theme is actually on this topic. We're calling it "Sacred Soil". It's going to be December 8th through the 10th and some of that will be at Happy Valley and some of it will be in partnership with the San Jose congregation, that anyone's invited. But we're focusing on bringing in experts from outside of Community of Christ to come and teach us about the various ways that our food system impacts our communities and the earth and how we can respond from a place of faith. A lot of invitations in that. But really, what is at the heart of it is that I just, I have this real sense of the urgency, that it feels like divine urgency to me, to take the gifts that we have as Community of Christ into the world, to really build shalom, and to see what we have as something to be joyfully given, joyfully given to the world around us.

Carla Long 16:40

That's beautiful. And before I jump into "Kiss the Ground", which I watched at Emily's suggestion, I was actually just at Utah State University teaching a class about who Community of Christ was, and I showed them all of our Enduring Principles. There was 100 students, college age students, in the room, and one of them really wanted to talk about the Sacredness of Creation. I was like, "Yeah, that's one of our Enduring Principles," and he thought it meant creating children, so I had to be very specific.

Emily Rose 17:09

Really specific.

Carla Long 17:10

"No, it's actually about nature," and he did not want to talk about that anymore. He was all bored with that. So, I felt like, I felt like I've talked about Sacredness of Creation quite a bit this week.

Emily Rose 17:19

Oh, how funny. I mean, as a new parent, yes, that has felt sacred, and I feel an urgency to make the earth habitable for my child.

Carla Long 17:31

Absolutely. I did want to say that because climate change has always been anxiety producing for me, but now that I've had children, it is double or triple the anxiety. And I do want to say that I watched "Kiss the Ground" as well. It's an hour and a half. The first 30 minutes is telling you everything that we're doing wrong and the last hour, it really does give hope because what is incredible, absolutely incredible about the earth is that it desperately wants to be healed. The earth wants to take care of itself. And if we allowed the earth to do that, by not completely stopping her from doing it, the Earth would do it on its own, you know. So, I was really fascinated by that. And I love that we're talking about the soil because at least in this documentary, and what I've learned, it all has to do with the soil, and how what we've been doing to the soil by tilling it is not helpful at all, and the pesticides and all the other things.

Emily Rose 18:28

When I watched it, especially now in planning this event with "Kiss the Ground" kind of at the heart of it, I just kept yelling Enduring Principles at the screen. One of the facts that stood out to me that was so beautiful, is that in one handful of healthy soil, there are more microorganisms than the number of people who have ever lived on earth combined, just one handful of healthy soil. If that's not Unity in Diversity, I don't know what is. And I love your focus on this impulse that the earth wants to heal itself. I once listened to a different podcast that interviewed Zach Bush, who does a lot of work around glyphosate, which is one of the most commonly used pesticides, it's like really linked to cancer. And he talked about how, for him, the concept of regeneration and healing faster than you're injured is grace to him, that that is grace. We can heal and turn the damage around faster than we have implemented that damage on the earth, and that's grace. I have not been able to let that go.

Carla Long 19:36

Wow, that's a really good quote.

Emily Rose 19:38 Yeah.

Carla Long 19:39 And also, a really good way to look at grace.

Emily Rose 19:42 Yeah. Theology is everywhere.

Carla Long 19:46 Theology is everywhere, good theology and sometimes not so good.

Emily Rose 19:50

And wonky, real wonky stuff out there.

Carla Long 19:51

Wonky is a better way of putting it. It sounds like there's quite a bit that congregations and individuals can do. So, a lot of the things that you're describing is maybe what individuals can do. They can join the book club or they can go to the Redwoods Peace Colloquy in December at Happy Valley in San Jose. There's a lot of things that you've described, which is awesome. What about from a congregational or community standpoint? What can congregations do in order to maybe help educate each other? Because, you know, sometimes we don't know what we don't know. It's a little less scary to learn it in a group because you're like, oh, well, that person didn't know it either. So maybe I'm not as dumb as I think I am. You know, things like that.

Emily Rose 20:35

Totally. I think there's a lot of gifts to come from learning in community. And we've definitely seen that in Love Out Loud. You made me think of a story just recently. So, we are just wrapping up a book about gender, and one woman from a congregation, I want to say in Seattle, talked about how they changed their bathrooms that used to be men and women's bathrooms, to be gender neutral bathrooms, just based on locks that say vacant or not vacant, and just like how they arranged the doors and the signs, and it was very easy. And there was another woman on the Zoom call from a different area of the country, and she was just dumbfounded how easy that was. She was like, that seems like such a practical, easy thing. We're gonna do that at our congregation. And so, A) I think, yes, learning in community is really helpful, because it de-stigmatizes and makes you feel less alone, if you don't know something, and B) there are just really practical ways to offer hospitality in our congregational buildings. And that's just one way to think about it. And the other thing you might consider doing as a congregation is choosing an Enduring Principle to focus on and then holding that Enduring Principle up with what is going on in your community. So, in Sierra Pacific we are focusing for a whole year on the Sacredness of Creation, and that is leading us down some of these pathways of learning, watching this documentary, planning some of the events that we're holding. But really, it's encouraging us to use the Enduring Principles as a lens for what are some of the current events that I am seeing in my world? So, say, as a congregation, you decide this year our, our lens that we're holding up, and we're really

focusing on, is Unity in Diversity. And then start to think about, well, what does that mean in my community? Where are the places where we are lacking unity in our diversity? Perhaps this leads the congregation to think, you know, I want to learn more about how to be an anti-racist person in the world. Are there organizations that are doing good, valid anti-racism work where I would be an asset as a member of faith, to show up and walk alongside? So, I think that the Enduring Principles are these really great trailheads that we can stand at as congregations and really see where the trail leads from there, with the hope that we enter into the community. Perhaps as a congregation, you decide, our city council meeting is in two weeks, and maybe we just all go just to listen and bear witness and see what's going on and what's being voted on in our communities. Or, I had this experience at in person church in Independence a few weeks ago, where we asked who's missing from the table? And I mean, immediately, we said people of color were missing. And to be fair, they weren't wrong. It's a very white body that was gathered there. And someone else at the table shared that there was a high population of Hispanic folks in the neighborhood and maybe we should offer English classes, which is fine. That's fine. But another person at the table, she worked in the school system, and she talked about testing students for various learning disabilities, and how it's sometimes really tricky for students who their primary language is Spanish, and so, taking these tests in English is already a high barrier. And she did her best to offer broken Spanish to the students and say, "¿Hola! Como estás?" and whatever she could to offer these students and their whole dynamic changed. And it was as if they just lit up and felt comfortable and felt like somebody saw them. And I thought to myself, you know, maybe it's not that we offer English classes, maybe it's that we take Spanish. And so, I really think that's our invitation, is to shift where is the center of gravity. Is the goal to shift ourselves into being this perfect place where all of these people try to come to us? If we just have the perfect worship and the perfect programming or whatever, then people will start coming? Or is it to say, who's missing? And what are the needs of the people who are missing? And how do I show up in the community to support those needs and who will I meet along the way? That's the shift in our conversation.

Carla Long 24:49

And that's why that community aspect is so important, right? You wouldn't have gotten there if that woman, that teacher hadn't spoken up. It's really important to have those conversations where you are open and willing to learn, and not say, well, we have all the answers. Why aren't people coming to listen to my answers?

Emily Rose 25:07 Right.

Carla Long 25:09

But be willing to change ourselves. That's really scary, Emily. It's really scary [inaudible].

Emily Rose 25:13

Yeah, it is. And we're gonna mess up. Learning about issues of peace and justice means admitting to ourselves that maybe we've participated in systems that perpetuate those injustices. Especially as a primarily white audience and congregation, we have to wrestle with white supremacy and what that means for us as congregations. And so, it's a vulnerable space to learn things that are hard to learn.

But when we do it in community, and when we do it prayerfully and with a willingness to get back up when we mess up, that's a holy endeavor, I think.

Carla Long 25:46

It is a holy endeavor. It takes a lot of intentionality to do that. And it takes a group of people who are really brave and willing to be wrong. And that is, I hope, who we are.

Emily Rose 25:59 Yes.

Carla Long 26:01

I want that to be who we are. And I know that that is where the Enduring Principles call us.

Emily Rose 26:05

Yeah, absolutely.

Carla Long 26:07

Emily, this has just been a fascinating and inspirational conversation. Is there anything else that you want to talk about that I didn't ask about?

Emily Rose 26:14

So, one of the things that struck me the most when I watched "Kiss the Ground" was how everything seemed to be connected to this thread of separation, right? So, we separated how we grew our food from how we grew our animals. And we separated all of these processes and created all this disconnection. And the thing that really blew my mind was tracing back how we started, in industrial agriculture, to apply pesticides, on this, like, mass scale, to our food that we grow. So really, what happened is some of the chemicals that were used in warfare, particularly in World War II, even related to some of the horrendous atrocities of the Holocaust, some of those chemicals were then rebranded as fertilizers and pesticides for farmers to use. So, it became so crystal clear to me that this is related to peace. There's a line in the movie that talks about how all of this is related to those wars. We started this industrial agricultural practice and it stems from war. And even more recently, Agent Orange in the Vietnam War, has been rebranded the chemical glyphosate. That is what is sprayed on so much of our food, and it's known to cause cancer, and it's rooted in war. And so, this light bulb moment happened for me when I was watching that, that if we are a peace church, and we claim to be a peace church, then this is just woven into everything that we eat. We can't just limit ourselves to thinking of war and peace when we think about trying to be a peace church. So much of this stems from violence and then is re-woven into violence that we have now. And so, when we think about the health of our soil and work to protect it, it's almost this act of restoring peace out of just this horrendous war. So that's something that really stood out to me was if we want to be called a peace church, then we really need to focus on our food system. There's so much lack of peace in our food system the way it is now, and there's so much opportunity to seek out peace and to be peace and justice advocates and ministers and disciples by protecting the earth.

Carla Long 28:52

I find that fascinating, fascinating, and also, the very idea that we need to be at war with the earth.

Emily Rose 29:00 Right.

Carla Long 29:00

We should be working together with the earth.

Emily Rose 29:03 Right.

Carla Long 29:03 We don't need to fight her. She knows what's best for her. We don't have to fight her. She gets it.

Emily Rose 29:07 Right. Right.

Carla Long 29:08 We're the ones who don't get it.

Emily Rose 29:10 Right.

Carla Long 29:11

Yeah, that is an, such an important point. Thank you for making that point. I think it's a really important thing for us as members and friends of a peace church to remember, that peace needs to be holistic peace. It's not just the absence of war. It's the working towards not being at war with nature, with our friends, with our family, whatever.

Emily Rose 29:33

There is just this invitation to healing, and shifting away from all of that separation that started, that we started talking about at the beginning, of separating how we grow food and separating who gets what. We're being invited into interconnectedness.

Carla Long 29:48

Yeah, though, I think that's another really important point is in the documentary it talks about how we separate livestock and growing crops. But really when you integrate them together, incredibly beautiful things can happen.

Emily Rose 30:00 Incredible things happen.

Carla Long 30:01 Cattle are not the enemy... Emily Rose 30:03 Yes.

Carla Long 30:04

... of soil like so many people think. They don't have to destroy everything if we...

Emily Rose 30:09 Right.

Carla Long 30:09 ...did it in a different way.

Emily Rose 30:11

This vegan is totally cool with cows and reincorporating them into the food system. It's so important. People get funny when I tell them that I'm a vegan, but I would really support other people eating meat that's grown in a sustainable way that's helping us fight climate change. I think that's fabulous.

Carla Long 30:28

Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, thank you so much for saying that, Emily. I really appreciate the idea of all of these things were products of war...

Emily Rose 30:36 Right.

Carla Long 30:37and they've been used as war against mother nature, and it's not where we need to be.

Emily Rose 30:41 Right.

Carla Long 30:41 It's not helpful. It has been hurting our soils for 60 years...

Emily Rose 30:46 Right.

Carla Long 30:46 ... for a really long time.

Emily Rose 30:47

And it helps create and perpetuate this illusion of separateness, like, oh, it's not going to hurt me. It's going to hurt the bugs that I am trying to kill on the farm or whatever. Like, the pesticides aren't really

going to hurt me, it's just getting rid of the pests. But we are all so, so deeply connected, and it does hurt us. It does.

Carla Long 31:06

It absolutely does. Thanks, Emily. So, I hope, gentle listener, that you have heard some ideas for things that you can do. I'm sure that you can contact Emily, if you'd like to.

Emily Rose 31:15 Oh, please, yes, please.

Carla Long 31:18

And how would they contact you if they, maybe if they wanted to go to the Redwoods Peace Colloquy in December or something like that?

Emily Rose 31:23

My email address is just my name, emilyrose, and then mdiv@gmail.com. You can contact me there and I can give you more information about this retreat. We're going to, actually at World Conference, have little stickers that give more information, and we've got flyers and stuff. So, come by the Mission Prayer booth that we'll have at World Conference, if you're going to be there, and we can talk all about it. And I will talk your ear off about how I think soil is sacred. And we'll have a great time.

Carla Long 31:55

That sounds awesome. Thank you so much, Emily. I just so appreciate hearing from you. And also thank you for the encouragement to watch the documentary "Kiss the Gound"...

Emily Rose 32:06 Thank you,

Carla Long 32:06which is on Netflix, which is just an exceptionally awesome...

Emily Rose 32:12 Yes.

Carla Long 32:12

...awesome documentary that gives you some hope about climate change. Just one of the things we've talked about today.

Emily Rose 32:17 Yes, absolutely. Give it a watch.

Carla Long 32:19 Thank you so much.

Emily Rose 32:21 Thank you.