

What's Brewing | Enriching Sacred Community | Wendy and Bill Brian

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

sacraments, congregation, mission, community, retreat, sacred, Christ, prayer, spiritual practices, spirit, discernment

SPEAKERS

Wendy Brian, Bill Brian, Robin Linkhart

Robin Linkhart 00:29

Hello and welcome to “What's Brewing”, a *Project Zion Podcast* series where we explore the question, what is mission and why does it matter? I am your host, Robin Linkhart, and I'm here today with Wendy and Bill Brian. Hey, Wendy and Bill, thanks so much for being with us today.

Bill Brian 00:51

Hi, Robin. Always good to be with you, although I wish we were together sitting on our front porch on this wonderful day in St. Paul, Minnesota. You know, we're humbled and honored to be asked to share our stories and ideas and hopefully it'll be helpful to you and your listeners.

Wendy Brian 01:08

Good to be here, Robin.

Robin Linkhart 01:10

Well, it's wonderful to be with both of you, and I too wish we were sharing together in your sunshine in Minnesota today. I want to take a little time to get to know you today, to have some space so our listeners can get to know you. Wendy recently joined our team of ministers on *Project Zion Podcast*, who provide guided meditations in our “Awaken to God's Presence” series, but this is the first time for both of you to be featured guests on a *Project Zion Podcast* interview. We would love a quick bio and be sure to include how you came to be invested in discipleship and ministry with Community of Christ. Wendy?

Wendy Brian 01:58

I can trace my Community of Christ heritage all the way back to Nauvoo. There are many generations of Community of Christ members on both sides of my family, so my DNA runs deep. My favorite heritage story is one that probably wouldn't happen in the Church today, at least not in the U.S. Church. My dad decided that we needed to move forward with a new building to meet in, so he found a property he thought appropriate, and this was in the early 1960s. He took a mortgage out on our house without telling my mom, this house that he built, and bought this building and this property, not asking forgive-

for, for any permission, believing that it was easier to ask for forgiveness later. This was an old Victorian house and we met in that for a little while. And when it came time to build the building, we needed to tear down the church or the Victorian house. So, I remember at the age of three, him handing me a hammer and taking some lath off the walls. And I'm sure that my contribution of taking that lath off the walls was not significant in the project, but I thought it was. I felt like I was contributing to something bigger than myself even at the age of three. My dad was pastor there for many years after the building was built and my mom was the ultimate hostess, made people feel welcome and loved as they walked through the doors. So, my lessons started early. Throughout my life, I've been active in many ways attempting to make the Church relevant in an ever-changing world. In my professional life as a nurse practitioner, I saw myself as a healer of sorts, not just to fix a medical issue that I may have been presented with, but to develop a relationship with my patients that brought wholeness to them, no matter what was happening inside their bodies. Just prior to retirement, and after graduating from Community of Christ seminary, I became deeply aware of how our relationships with the Divine is an important part of that wholeness. That led me on a journey to seek out training as a spiritual director and to also complete Community of Christ Spiritual Formation and Companionship program. On a more personal level, Bill and I've been married for 42 years this month, and we still like each other. We've lived in seven different states. We were high school sweethearts, but we finished undergraduate work before we got married. And we have two wonderful adult children who have chosen delightful spouses that we adore and enjoy spending time with.

Robin Linkhart 05:12

Thank you so much, Wendy. That is an amazing story. And every time we chat together, I learn something new about you. Bill?

Bill Brian 05:22

Yeah, Wendy, have we really lived in seven different states? I lost track somewhere. We lived around, about 30 years around Philadelphia and the Mid-Atlantic Mission Center before we moved to St. Paul, in late 2019, and we arrived just a few months before COVID moved here as well, so it's been an interesting trip here in Minnesota. First of all, I agree with Wendy, she's still my best friend. And I agree with her about our kids and grandkids, just love, love, love being with them. About me, I have lots of different hobbies and things, but I recently retired as a scientist working to develop new medicines to help human patients. But you know, I'm still a scientist. I was born a scientist. I'm curious, and I'm always asking questions and trying to figure out how biology works. And I also have an interesting curiosity about how organizations work. And I just say that because knowing that may help as we go through this discussion today about this retreat. Now I was baptized and began to follow Jesus in Community of Christ when I was 19 years old. And Wendy and I had started dating and I reluctantly, every once in a while, attended the congregation, but made it clear that, that I really didn't want to be there. But you know, that group was my first real exposure to sacred community or spiritual home, what we now call sacred community or spiritual home. And I found a place there where I was welcomed and loved. Now, as a kid and a teen, I experienced a lot of loneliness and sense of loss for myself and in my family. We didn't have a spiritual home, we had no sacred community to walk with us, and we really could have benefited from that. And as I said, I found that sacred community in Community of Christ. And so, since my teen years, my passion has been to help create spiritual homes, or sacred community for others. I mean, it really, that's what drives me. And so, those who are in people who are in difficult

situations, tough situations can begin and grow their discipleship and experience the blessings of community. And honestly, I think Wendy and I have found Community of Christ to be very fertile ground in which to do that. And so, since our young adult life together, Wendy and I have always found ourselves in these atypical ministry situations, either helping congregations revitalize or starting new expressions of Community of Christ. Our call, really, really our passion, is to create and nurture sacred communities for individuals and families who don't have that, as I just said. We've helped congregations reconnect with members and friends who stopped attending. We've helped them reconnect with the neighborhoods where their buildings may be, or in other situations. We've helped organize four or five congregation plants, depending on how you count that, including setting up a congregation for kids. A Cong-, we, helping our kids when they were teens, helping them develop a ministry for teens, a couple of home-based congregations in our last congregation in the Pennsylvania area, which our mission center president once described as radical. So that's a bit of our history there.

Robin Linkhart 08:54

Thank you so much, Bill. I love the way you paint this picture of your early life and coming to know Wendy and through Wendy connecting with Community of Christ, and this passion that sounds like it began to just blossom in you early on in your discipleship with Community of Christ, to create spiritual homes for others. That just, I love that phrase. Thank you so much. So, I just want to say that early this year, I saw publicity coming from Headwaters Mission Center, which is one of the mission centers that I support in the North Central USA mission field, and this publicity was advertising for a leaders retreat that would be coming up. And the title was "Enriching Sacred Community with Sacraments, Tater Tots and the Mission Prayer". And that retreat title just captivated me, and I noticed that you two were the guests ministers. And I knew enough about you that I was like, oh man, I want to go to this retreat. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to, but I did have the wonderful opportunity to visit you in your home in the first part of February. And while I was there, and experiencing this wonderful, warm, fully, enwrapped in hospitality experience that you both exude, and Wendy talked about learning that from her mother, and I would say from both parents early in her life. Well, during that time, we had lots and lots of wonderful conversations and I was privileged to hear more about your experience planting ministry that is centered on sacred community, deep relationship, and sharing life, and it, what I heard echoed, this phrase that Bill shared about creating spiritual home for others. So, I think as we take this journey with you and hearing about this amazing retreat, that we need to hear some backstory of how you came to offer a retreat that was focused on that title that has tater tots smack dab in the middle of the title. So, tell us everything.

Wendy Brian 11:26

We were asked to be guest ministers at the leaders retreat and discussion with the mission center presidents led to an interest in the retreat to go deeper in the invest-, investigation of the mission prayer, and the use of sacraments in atypical situations. So, I had done some work previous for Temple Tuesday on the sacraments and a deep dive into the sacraments, and what they all meant, and how we could set that up for others to help learn deeper into that. So, I felt like I'd done a lot of the research on that. And so, I took on the sacraments and Bill took on the mission prayer part of it, and we tried to weave those stories together to make them relevant to the leaders who came to this retreat. We've tried to both live lives consistent with the mission prayer and our, our son says that Bill tell stories about it all

the time. So, he's developed this whole mission prayer initiative himself because of all of the stories that he's lived through, with and through us.

Bill Brian 12:44

So, Wendy and I work in different ways and we'll tell you a little secret here. While she was trying to help, or trying to develop a serious theme for the retreat, we were kicking things back and forth, I thought that we should have just a little bit of fun, because I think everything should have a little bit of fun, and it generates interest for the retreat. So, one cold, dark January morning here in, in St. Paul, we were tossing possibilities back and forth, Wendy, very serious, me not so much, and we did a, we did agree that our perspectives and history with the mission prayer is all about relationships, and relationships to us is about creating sacred community or spiritual homes. And you'll hear us kind of go back and forth on that sacred community, spiritual homes. And we also agreed that sacraments should enrich the life of the sacred community, which comes from section 158 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, "Look especially to the sacraments to enrich the spiritual life of the body." And that's been our experience in all of these different situations that we've found, of how the sacraments can enrich the life of the sacred community. So, relationships, sacred community, spiritual home, that led to hospitality, which led to a big table where everyone is welcome, and around that big table, we can share meals, which is one of our favorite ways to do church. And since we live in Minnesota, that means hot dishes and tater tots. So, that's a long way, a long explanation, to tell you how tater tots ended up in the middle of that title. Now for example, if we still lived around Philadelphia, instead of tater tots, we would have had cheese steaks, or soft pretzels in the title, but the idea is hospitality, all are welcome, let's sit down around that big table. So, we offered that theme: potato tots, and we offered a more serious theme, and the mission center presidents picked the tater tots theme. So that's what we ran with: sacraments, mission prayer, relationships, hospitality.

Robin Linkhart 15:07

So, I think we're ready now for an overview of the content and the experience of this retreat, and like the key concepts and, and how you delivered that.

Bill Brian 15:23

Well, maybe, maybe first just to introduce the mission prayer again, for those who aren't familiar with it or it's always good to refresh. It goes like this. "God, where will your Spirit lead today? Help me be fully awake and ready to respond. Grant me courage to risk something new, and become a blessing of your love and peace. Amen."

Wendy Brian 15:54

So, when approaching the sacrament part of the tater tot discussion, I thought it was important to approach this with intentionality, spirituality, and community, intentionally so that we don't perform the sacraments, just because we can, but we really approach them using the sacraments in much deeper, more meaningful ways. Take the Lord's supper or communion, for example. We traditionally celebrate the Lord's supper on the first Sunday of every month, so when we come to church on that Sunday, there is an expectation that we will have communion. It doesn't have to be that way, but traditionally it has been. And I'm not saying that's a bad thing, but sometimes when we put things into a less of a routine, it becomes more deeply meaningful. We talked about how we could bring a fresh approach to

this and the other sacraments that connect us on a deeper level with each other, and with the divine. Spirituality is about the relationship with the divine, and how we can feel that Holy Presence deep in our souls each and every time we participate together, whether it be a more public sacrament, such as communion, baptism, or baby blessings, or a more private sacrament, such as an evangelist blessing. Community comes in where we share together. And then we have to think about who is our community? Is it inside or outside the walls of the church, or is it both? And how can we bring that community together to feel a vested interest as a recipient of the sacrament or as one performing the sacrament? When we pray the mission prayer, "Where will your Spirit lead today?", it is at the heart of that intentionality, weaving in that Spirit and community together. At our leaders retreat we discussed, we discussed each sacrament in detail, the scriptural foundation for each one, some historical perspective, and we talked about the three core elements of each sacrament, which are: a sign or symbol, words that are spoken, and a covenant. And also, we gave examples of how Bill and I have experienced them in some unusual and atypical circumstances. This is what it says about sacraments on the Community of Christ website. "We encounter God through the sacraments of the Church, which touch lives at important times and places. Sacraments bring God's grace, the influence of the Holy Spirit, and the example of life of Jesus Christ, with one's personal commitment of faith. Through the sacraments, we discover the presence of God everywhere, and realize that all life is sacred. These encounters point to God's loving desire to bring all people to peace, wholeness, and right relationships with one another and the Divine, which is the meaning of salvation. The sacraments, refresh, renew, and challenge us to continue on Christ's mission, our mission, for the sake of all creation, intentionality, spirituality, and community. God, where will your Spirit lead today?"

Bill Brian 19:53

And so, for the discussion on the mission prayer, we wanted to take a look at that as leaders, not as individuals, but as leaders of congregations or perhaps other groups, since it was a leaders retreat, and to try to look at it in a way that maybe was a new way or a refreshed way. And so, we tried a few different things. First thing we highlighted there was a key concept, I think, for us, that has become more and more visible and more and more real for us over the last few years, and that is from section 161 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, "The path of the disciple moves inward and moves outward." And so, by moving inward I take that in terms of developing spiritual practices, and regularly participating in those spiritual practices to develop our inward selves. And then I found that so important when we're out in the world, when we're on that path outward, that the deeper our roots inward, the more we can do outward, and the more we understand where God is at work, and how we can interpret that, and how we can work into that. And so, one really doesn't work as well without the other. So, we emphasize that to begin with. And part of that is, you know, a lot of times I've heard in different settings, when we talk about the mission prayer, somebody will say, well, let's go do something out there in response to that mission prayer. And while I'm all about doing something out there, we also have found it very important to do the inward work as well, because when you're out there in the middle of whatever situations you find yourself in, you need to have those deep roots. And this has certainly been highlighted, really, I guess, throughout the history of the Church, but President Veazey has really pushed on this in the last 10 years or so, at least, that's where I've picked up on it. So, we started with a, kind of a fun little visio divina, talking about spiritual practice, if you will, and Visio Divina, I, I do spiritual practices a little bit different than a lot of people that visio divina, not so different, is one of my favorites. But we showed a picture that, it was an abstract painting that has several sunflowers in it

full bloom. So, you've got the brown centerpiece where the seeds would be and then you've got the yellow petals around it, and then that's surrounded by red poppies. Those of you who are gardeners, at least in the north U.S., we know that sunflowers and poppies are not going to bloom together, but that's part of the abstract. And there are other, there's green, and there's blue, and there's orange, and there are other colors going on in that painting. And I, we have found over the years that the more you look at that painting, the more that you see. A quick glance will show you, yeah, there's a few sunflowers, that the more you look, the more you see. So, we put that up for the group, and we just asked them to spend some time with us, and then tell us what you see. And the idea here was to start to look inward and then to share outward is just an example of the mission prayer. And also to not just take the obvious, but to let your imagination play a little bit, and see what it is that you can come up with. And every time we do this, we come up with different answers. People see things in that painting that, and we've lived with that painting for 15 years now and things that we have never seen before. It's a very dynamic painting, very, full of energy for me. And we wanted to kind of bring those concepts: look inward, look outward, use your imagination, be open to what this energy can be, either going inward or outward. So that's how we set it up. And then we broke it down, like often is done, to awaken, risk and bless. And over the years, when we talk about awaken here, but it's a question that, that I've developed several years ago, and just to ask a group of people, a group of leaders and say, "If you could start a new congregation, what would you do? What would it look like? What would its purpose be?" And not to say that current congregations that you're in are bad, but let's just take a fresh look about what it means to be a congregation or we would say, sacred community or spiritual home. So then, individually, we gave people a couple of minutes to think about that, and then come back and talk together as a group, go back a couple of minutes more, think about that, come back and talk and share with the group. And, you know, we always find that there's some pretty interesting ideas and visions that come out of that. I'm surprising for ourselves, or even for the individual who may have thought about it. And, again, part of that is we found over the years that sometimes we're so busy being a congregation that we don't just sit still for a while and think about what it is that we're doing, or why we're doing it, you know, how, how are we to be awakened, either in our new congre-, in our congregation, or if we were to think about a new expression of Community of Christ. So then next, risk was brought up. And here we really focused on discernment, which I think is a very, very, very important concept, and we could talk about that a lot today on the podcast, we won't, but discernment being a simple definition that's not so simple but, intentionally pursuing God's call, rather than decision making, or rather what we think might be best. How do we intentionally pursue God's call? And how do we create a culture of discernment in leading our congregations and living in those congregations? You see, for us, risk really probably shouldn't be started unless you have this Spirit of, some sense of Spirit of discernment because there are risks to being a church, a congregation in today's society and we need to be grounded in the Spirit, grounded in God and the Divine before we set out. Not that we don't risk, that's what imagination is for and that's what curiosity and asking questions is for, but being grounded, and, and having that Spirit of discernment. We also talked there about doing experiments. You know, so often we're worried about, well, what if we change up how we do worship? Or what if we start something else in another group? What if it doesn't work? What if somebody gets upset? Those types of things, and developing a culture of experiments that allows us, you know, every once in a while, we're gonna goof up. Every once in a while an experiment won't work. But that doesn't mean that, that we failed, it just means that we've tried something, trying to discern and live into that next faithful step, and sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't, but that's the path that we are called to go on as we risk. And then finally, what is our

passion? As leaders, what is our passion within the congregation? And what is our giftedness? Because if we're going to risk, we should risk into our passion, risk into our giftedness, where we'll have that energy, and we'll have some gifts or resources that we can apply to it, and that will increase the probability that our experiments will be successful. So that was risk. And then finally, bless, of course that's always the tough part, right? How do we implement what it is that we come up with? And so, in small groups, we talked about that. And with this idea of using our imaginations, developing a culture of discernment, and how do we faithfully and intentionally respond to Christ's mission as individuals within a congregation and then the congregation as a whole? And how do we do that generously, with whole life stewardship? Because it's as Christ said, we're called to give our life away. And the congregations, we think, are called to give our lives away. And so how do we do that in a way that's generous, and we're not pulling back because we don't want to, where we're afraid to? So, moving inward, moving outward, using imaginations, discernment, spiritual formation, community involvement, just like we've heard time and time again lately, when we hear our leaders from Community of Christ, when we read the *Herald*, like recent World Conference, all those sorts of things that are calling us to live the mission prayer.

Robin Linkhart 29:48

That is fascinating. I love listening to you each talk about how this was birthed in and through you and how you shared that with folks. And it, it makes me wonder what kind of reactions and responses you got at the retreat, and how are the participants sent out into the world at the close of the retreat? And then, do you have any sense of what's happening now or even just some tiny beginnings?

Wendy Brian 30:21

Well, I believe the intention of the retreat was to empower our leaders to be bold in their offerings of the sacraments and their pursuits of mission, to respect the long-standing traditions but not be tied to them so much that we couldn't be flexible in our ability to change things up a little bit in different ways, in different settings, and just viewing the opportunities in different ways. So, they seemed to enjoy discussing amongst them the different possibilities, just clear your mind of everything you know, and start like you pretending like you don't know what you got, and, and go from there. So, there's no rules, there's no traditions, there's none of those things that sometimes we see as obstacles. As far as the sacraments go, I really believe that they're a true gift to the church, and they're a beautiful way of extending God's grace and love to everyone. Not sure how every participant is expressing what they took from the retreat at this time because we live a distance apart and don't have the constant connection with each other, but I have had a few follow up emails with clarifying questions that lead me to believe that they're thinking about this stuff. And that's the first step in, in filling that, that passion within them. Others have asked, as far as the sacraments go, to receive sacraments themselves, as if they were viewing them in new and deeper meanings.

Robin Linkhart 32:23

Thank you, Wendy. It sounds like in your time together in retreat that people were able to kind of let go, like you say, let go of preconceptions and open themselves to experiencing sacrament and sacred community, and spiritual, a sense of spiritual home, and that awaken, risk, bless, and just kind of allow themselves to imagine the possibility of living into that generously as whole hearted disciples in ways that God is whispering to them. I'm hearing you talk about how listening to the Holy Spirit and faithfully

responding step by step, not fully knowing where the Spirit is ultimately taking you, how that brought you into deep life changing experiences of this sacred community, and sacraments and breaking bread and, and ultimately, sharing life. I mean, the word relationship keeps coming up, that the inward process of relationship with the Divine, and that outward sending, and relationship, and, and just living the things that we feel compelled to share with others, to help others, to see and touch others so that they can live the mission prayer and, and, respond one step at a time too. And it just feels like you can't be too young or too old to live the mission prayer. So, as you reflect on your own lives, of living it and then, teaching it, what did you find challenging or difficult along the way?

Wendy Brian 34:25

Section 161:3c, cautions us to “Be patient with one another for creating sacred community is arduous.” I hear those words of caution in my head when I'm feeling frustrated, or tired, or discouraged. And we make no claims that this work of building community is easy, or will make your life carefree, but it is an adventure. If you need your soul to rest, listen to your soul and take a rest from it. We've had disappointments and tears, but we've also witnessed transformed lives that have been unbelievable to watch that grow in others and feel Christ's love.

Bill Brian 35:25

Wendy, maybe we should mention that our family motto is “Every day is an adventure.” And we've lived that since our kids were born, and I guess before then. And I agree with Wendy that we joke that “creating sacred community”, that phrase is going to be written on my tombstone, but again, I can't imagine living any other way. We could tell a lot of stories about the challenges that we've faced. And, you know, that's not something we necessarily want to spend a lot of time on today, but, and as Wendy said, enriched lives as we've worked to develop these sacred communities. I've got a whole list here in front of me of things to, how we've gone about creating sacred communities, and words like discernment. We've talked about imagination, intentionality, also vulnerability, spiritual formation, community involvement, experimentation, invitation transformation, things that we've always tried to take into account, well not always, but we've learned over the years and try to take those into account. And that sounds like a lot to consider, and is a lot to create and to nurture that, especially when we're doing church in unfamiliar ways while we're living into a future that we don't quite understand or see beyond that next faithful step. So, there's a lot of challenges in that, when many of us are used to a congregation where we, we may struggle to find a speaker once in a while, and we may struggle to find a Sunday school teacher once in a while. But when we're out in new expressions, or when we're, you know, in a new congregation, or when we're trying something new within our existing congregation, all of a sudden, there may not be any guidelines, and maybe we aren't even sure what the rules are. And so that's where sometimes those challenges and frustrations come in. But again, at the same time, I think that's where faith really calls us to. You know, walking with Jesus was taking just the next faithful step into a place Jesus was going, places that maybe we didn't even understand where we were going yet. So, it makes you tired at times, and it may break your heart at times. And yet, when it works, it's an amazing experience. I was thinking about this last congregation that we started, and we were part of a group that started, I shouldn't, it wasn't just Wendy and me starting it, it was a group of friends who came together, and we could tell that story some other time, or maybe yet in this podcast. But we struggled in the beginning because we knew that we wanted to do something new, and we felt called and compelled not to set up another congregation like congregations that we had all known and grown

up in. But a new expression in, that was timely, or the place, in the situations that we would, situation that we lived in. We spent a lot of time trying to figure out exactly what that meant, and then we launched. And we still spent a lot of time trying to figure out what is our culture? What is our identity? What is our call? How do we awaken to that? And we're in the middle of taking a big risk here experimenting. What, what does all of that mean? And then several months in, we had a communion worship and we, maybe a bit like the old fashion, here's we're doing something new. But we used a bit of the old-fashioned prayer and testimony, although we didn't call it that, prayer and testimony kind of communion worship, where we asked some questions which I think were: How do you feel loved? How do you feel loved by God? How do you feel loved by this sacred community? Where are you now on your spiritual journey?" Things like that. We weren't quite sure how people would respond to that. And that worship went a long time because people felt like they had a voice, and people felt like they were in a safe space, and we were, had already begun developing those relationships that were growing deep roots. And so, I remember we had, we had one person who had just recently started attending who got up three or four times to tell, tell his story of how he felt loved by God or by others. And it was in that moment that thinking of all of the challenges of trying to figure out this new expression, and where God was calling us, and yet finding those, that rich, rewarding, people's lives were being transformed, including our own, and an experience that I hope I never forget.

Robin Linkhart 40:43

So, continuing along with this sense of transformation, how have you witnessed the transformation of lives and communities as a result of these unique opportunities to stretch and learn together, both as you've lived into the ministry, and then more recently, coming to a brand new mission center and inviting people into this circle of understanding how this connects with the living Christ mission in the world of today?

Bill Brian 41:18

Well, you know, maybe I got ahead of myself there, talking not only about challenges, but about one transforming experience. But here's another one that comes out of the retreat. And you had asked, you know, how did we send people out? Wendy developed a spiritual practice for groups, I think we can call it that, several years ago, where we bring together different types of oils, and mix them together into one jar of oil, which can then be used in the sacrament of laying on of hands. And those oils, the different oils that are mixed together, have a scriptural background, mostly out of the Old Testament. What I like about it, I like the stories about those oils, but I also love the smell. And the lemongrass to me is just amazing when it's mixed with the others. So, we have the group mix the oils together, and then when that's complete, we offer a prayer of consecration, and talking about being intentional, and then we divvy up the oil, separate the oil into different vials that people can then take back home with them. And then, you know, when you use that in the sacrament of laying on of hands, you can say, "This is oil that was intentionally set apart for this purpose. And when you smell the different oils, there's a biblical reference for that. And this was put together by a community." So, this sacrament has a cloud of witnesses around it, if you will, while we do that, and then you can smell the smell for quite, quite some time afterwards. So, you carry that sense of Spirit and sacrament with you. Well, at the retreat, we put the oil together, and then we did something that was fairly familiar to us, but based on the looks on people's faces, they were a little bit shocked at the retreat, when we said, "Now, if anyone would like to come up and sit in this chair, we will work through laying on of hands, you know that sacrament, and

we will pray for you. And Wendy and I will offer the first prayer as an example for the first person who's brave enough to sit in the chair, and then we'll just see where the Spirit blows." And like I said, there were some shocked looks there and, and some hesitancy but then somebody hopped in the chair and Wendy and I presided over that sacrament, and the smell of the oil. And then we stepped back, and somebody else jumped in the chair. And I think Wendy or I went up, but then another elder came up, and, part of that sacrament. And then the Spirit began to flow. And we had several people who were coming up. I don't recall that this was all about physical ailments. I think it was more about the kinds of issues and struggles you find yourself in as leaders of congregations. And you could just sense that people were feeling a sense of relief or release, of a strengthening, a number of things that went along with that sacrament. The sacraments are there to enrich the sacred community was what we were practicing there and we sent people out that way. I remember, there was even one elder who said, "I've never done this sacrament before." And they jump in to be a part of this because they were so excited about that experience. So, we could tell a lot of other stories, but I thought that was very relevant to, to the retreat itself.

Wendy Brian 45:25

Going back to the intentionality and spirituality and community of the sacrament, so we put them together and use them in new and reframe the beauty of them. What a joyous thing it is to share together. And leaders who came from different places and may not have known each other very well opened up and became vulnerable to share their struggles and their, their heaviness that they were feeling with leadership and participated together, and allowing some of that burden to be shared throughout this leader community. It was, it was a beautiful experience together, and one that I won't soon forget. When we moved from the Mid-Atlantic Mission Center, where we lived for, like Bill said, about 30 years, most of our adult life, to the Headwaters Mission Center, it was October of 2019, five months prior to COVID shutting down the world. And we hadn't yet really settled into our new church home. We were isolated like everyone else. And as you know, it takes time to meet people and develop those relationships, and here we are our first dark, cold winter in Minnesota, alone, and not even able to visit our kids who we moved here to be close to. I'm sure as many of your listeners experienced, there was a lot of hopelessness in that time. But those words from the mission, from the mission prayer, "Help me be fully awake and ready to respond," continued to echo in my head and in my heart. What do, what do I have to respond to? There's two of us here in this house. How, how can I make this prayer, once again, live within me? And at the same time, my training as a spiritual director and participating in the spiritual formation program moved to an online format. So, we grieved our lack of personal gatherings, but showed more possibilities opened up those avenues of thinking and new ways to develop relationships. It showed me that there was a place to build sacred spaces, even if we can't be in person. And the World Church shortly after our shutdown came out with guidance on how we could move forward to use the sacraments and online formats and opening opportunities that none of us ever dreamed possible. That's where those words continue to come, "Help me be fully awake." If I hadn't been fully awake to some of these opportunities, we would have missed experiences that were deeply meaningful. Our local congregations' worships became more interactive with each other. Rather than just somebody up front speaking to me, we were able to speak to each other, see each other's faces through the screens. And I learned the lives of the other people that I was now calling my community and my church home. And I felt like I was becoming more and more connected. And when we share some of our stories with others, Bill and I usually have an unwritten rule between us that our

stories have to have happened within the last month just to keep things relevant, and it was hard to come up during that time with recent relevant stories. Yet we were still called to develop those relationships and it reinforced to us how important time is with others, listening to them and, and hearing where their deep, deep soul is speaking to us.

Robin Linkhart 50:04

That's beautiful. Well, no doubt some of our listeners are thinking, how can we plant ministry like this in my mission center, or in my community, or in my neighborhood? So, what are some principles or guiding questions, maybe some tips that you can share, to help folks begin to explore possibilities of how they might live into enriching, sacred community, with sacraments, and tater tots and the mission prayer?

Bill Brian 50:42

Well, if people are interested in doing something like that, we'd love to talk with them and walk with them along the way, because that's, that's where the fun is. So, we came up with a list of things, and I hate to just read a list, but, you know, we could, we could spend hours working through this. So maybe just a few things on the list to help folks here get started. And maybe the first thing is that new expressions can be something within an existing congregation. And certainly, Wendy and I, in helping congregations revitalize have, have done that. And sometimes I'm a little concerned in this post-COVID world that many of our congregations have gone to worship only, and have not taken the time to consider what else can be done within the life of a sacred community beyond that hour, or whatever it is that we take for worship, so it's really opening ourselves up and imagining again. So, here's some of the things on the list. First of all, remember that the reason we're doing all of this is because it's about real people. We care about people, and we love people, because God loves people. And I think that that really is at the core of it. It's not about building a new organization or building a new expression. It's about helping people who want, or need, or can contribute to a spiritual home, and not giving them a handout. It's saying, come and let's walk together and create this spiritual home with some things that are important to me and some things that are important to you, and see what beauty comes out of that. And of course, that means hospitality, spiritual homes, big table, hot dishes, tater tots, cheesesteak, soft pretzels, whatever it is. Next is, as we've already said is following Christ in mission and that Spirit of discernment, and trying to set our priorities right. You know, Jesus said, we'll find our life in giving our life. And that's really not that Wendy and I have sacrificed much, but that's where we have found life is in living out, creating and nurturing those sacred communities. I can't imagine living any other way, and the stories that we've created, or that have been created for us along the way. It's listening carefully to the Spirit going inward, listening carefully to the people that we walk with and in our neighborhoods as we live outward. I think another important point here is, it's important to do this with a team. It's really, if you're, if you're an individual and feel called to do something like this, and again, in the sense of the retreat, we were talking to leaders leading congregations, but, you know, find those people that you can talk with, who can support you, who can offer helps along the way, those kinds of things. Or ideally, develop a leadership team that can help with these new expressions and bring different gifts and different understandings of Spirit. And make sure you include one or two people who disagree with you, just to make sure that you, you, you know, really dig deep into things about why you're doing it. What is our intention here? And then, of course, I guess along with priorities is generosity, again, that whole life stewardship, because you'll be called to do things that you may not want to do, or use your resources in

ways that sometimes you might question. We think that Community of Christ identity, mission, message and beliefs, knowing those is very important because when you're out doing new things, you're going to be questioned and you're going to find yourself in situations. And you don't have to make all that up on your own. In many ways, by looking at identity, mission, message and beliefs, that helps you figure out, well, what might be the right answer in the Spirit of discernment. And that, just to finish up the list, a very short, very long short list. But to finish up that list is, resources are available from the World Church and from other sources, different congregations, mission centers, areas, whatever it is. I hear time and time again, we just want the answers. Well, living in a Spirit of discernment means that oftentimes there might be guides, but you develop the answers for your local situation. But there are good resources from the World Church on discernment, on generosity, on building new expressions, or creating new expressions, spiritual practices. Look those up and along with the identity, mission, message and beliefs, and put all that together. Again, it sounds complicated, but if you do it in the Spirit of trying to help build a spiritual home for people who don't have one, because you love people, and feel God's love for people, and it just becomes a part of a way of life, at least, that's been our experience.

Robin Linkhart 56:35

That has been my experience as well. Even though there was a time when I was like, I would say terrified, deeply sensing the call, and then just sheer terror. But walking into that and leaning into the Spirit's presence, and that one step at a time, in the midst of all of the things that, that you've shared. It's, it is amazing. It's truly amazing what made you there, and the people who are so hungry for that Spirit food and authentic relationship. It's just, it's just so sacred and beautiful. Indeed...

Bill Brian 57:22

Again, that's, that's what faith is all about. And we love building sacred community with others. So, it's not just that people need it, it's that, come, help us. You're a beautiful addition to this sacred community or spiritual home that we feel called to create.

Robin Linkhart 57:45

Yeah. Wendy, you were recently ordained to the office of evangelist. How does your ministry connect and support the way of living and being that we are talking about today?

Wendy Brian 58:00

I'm still learning where new ministry opportunities are for me as I do my best to live out this new role of evangelist, which are called ministers of blessing. I don't think the ink is even dry on my new priesthood card yet, so I have a lot to learn. Fortunately, I've been able to surround myself with people in that role that I deeply respect and can call upon when needed. And Bill has talked about the inward and outward journey that we all must take to do this work. And sometimes it's hard to know where to even start with that. Regular spiritual practices is a good place. And I would hope that I can help others find a way to have those deep soulful connections with the Divine, maybe something that they even look forward to doing on a daily basis. And there's many ways to develop these. And not every, "practice" will be meaningful to everyone, so offering a wide variety of experiences for that connection is really important. The end of the mission prayer says, "Grant me the courage to risk something new, and become a blessing of your love and peace." And I think that statement embodies this new ministry calling for me.

Robin Linkhart 59:39

Bill, I want to ask you the same question as you provide ministry in the office of seventy, and also, as you serve as the mission center invitation support minister in Headwaters. How does your ministry connect and support the way of living and being we're talking about?

Bill Brian 59:59

Well, the ink on my card has been dry for a long time, and I've been fortunate to live in this call for quite some time. And first of all, let me just say I love, love, love, love walking with individuals, or families as they consider committing to following Christ, or even just participating within a sacred community. I mean, I really love that when it involves tater tots, or Philly cheese steaks. But for a long time now I, I've felt that my calling as a seventy is to help create sacred communities. And you're probably tired of hearing me say that in this podcast, but it's really about building those sacred communities. And whether that's out in our neighborhoods, whether it's a new expression within an existing congregation, whether it's a camp, and we haven't even talked about working with teens and kids at camp settings, things like that. Boy, to develop those sacred communities where people feel welcomed and safe, and lives are transformed, that's where I feel called to live out my calling. In my Headwaters role as invitational support minister, I try to help individuals in congregations in the Mission Center, understand their call, and to be able to more fully engage with Christ's mission in their neighborhoods, whether again, it's, it's something new in their congregation or something different, or whether it's a new expression. And we do have a few people here in the mission center who are needing to consider church planting opportunities and what that might, or congregational planting, or sacred community planting, and what, how they understand if that's a call for them, and how they maybe can put that together. So, again, as COVID has become more manageable, and Wendy and I are able to get out and develop these new relationships in our mission center here, and that, that the retreat was very helpful for that to, to spend time with people we hadn't met before, we're becoming more and more aware of those kinds of opportunities.

Robin Linkhart 1:02:22

Thank you. And I never get tired of hearing about any of this, so it's just great. What are your hopes for Community of Christ as we live into the future?

Wendy Brian 1:02:36

Because my roots in Community of Christ run deep, my selfish hope would be that it would still be here and relevant for my grandkids, so they can grow and learn in these sacredness together. And that the church will be able to continue to be relevant in the world as society around them continues to change. Our Enduring Principles are timeless. And I would hope that those who are searching might hear their relevance and embrace what we have to offer through them. We can learn to offer the sacraments more freely to everyone who desires to receive them, and feel God's grace and love flow through that experience. Our table is endless. Bring your friends.

Bill Brian 1:03:34

And for me, you know, I like to think that I'm a positive realist. And so, I know the church has a lot of challenges now and ahead of us. I don't think we can duck that or, or not face it head on. But, you

know, there are many other faith groups and other secular organizations that are being challenged in that same way in this new culture, new society that we find ourselves living in. And so again, I think that's where the inward path and the outward path becomes so important to develop those roots in Spirit or Divine, and then see how we are, become aware, or awake of what's going on around us and where God is already at work, and how we can risk and bless in ways that foster justice and peace. We have seen it. We have lived it. We have experienced it. And so that is where my hope comes from. If I can tell just one more story, it's just, just a developing story, but our congregation here in Headwaters Mission Center, our home congregation, if you will, we have been supporting a local nature preserve which is in the town where the church building is, and one of our members has been supporting for quite some time and, and we've made a bigger commitment there working in the nature preserve. A couple of people on the, on the sort of the board of directors, if you will, it's a very small organization, but, and many members in the congregation have helped over time to do things in the preserve to, to improve it, to beautify it, to protect it from invasive species and those kinds of things. Well, the leader of that organization knew of a Girl Scout troop that was looking for a place to meet, and she asked if we would talk with the Girl Scout leader. And now the Girl Scouts meet regularly in our facility. And that's been a dream here for people for some time, to use that facility in a better way in the neighborhood. And just last week, the Girl Scouts dedicated a little rock garden that they made, where they had painted different rocks with inspirational sayings, and put up a sign saying, you know, these rocks are given for your inspiration. And, please take one but please bring others and add to the garden. And they had a little dedication and the scouts were so excited to tell us about it. And they were so thankful that they had a place to do that. And so, there's a network here developing that I'm not sure where it's going. And there are other pieces of that network going out across St. Paul. That, part of me is scared, and part of me is fascinated. But God, where, where are you leading? And if it's nothing more than helping out the nature preserve and providing a space for the Girl Scouts, that's fantastic, because we're now becoming good neighbors. But maybe, maybe, just maybe there's more to this network. And so that's the kind of stuff that we've lived before, and that's the kind of stuff that brings me hope. So that's I think where we would, I would find my hopes today.

Robin Linkhart 1:07:11

Thank you so much. You have certainly brought a fullness of hope into our space that we're sharing together here online. Is there anything else you want to share today that I haven't asked you about?

Bill Brian 1:07:27

You know, I said at the beginning, we were humbled and honored to be here today, but we don't want to make a big deal about us. I mean, we know a lot of other people who are doing a lot of other things. And so, we just tried to share with you some of our experiences over the years and in different places and different situations. We're just two people living out our individual calls and our partner call together and the situations that we find ourselves in. So hopefully the stories mean something there that can be helpful. Just to follow up, finish up, following Jesus has meant everything and still means everything to me. It's shaped me in a way that I think Jesus was talking about when he was really here. So, if there are other, if there are ways that I and we can help others find their way to a spiritual home so that they can help create that spiritual home, that's what we want to do. Sit around the big table and eat tater tots.

Wendy Brian 1:08:34

Intentionality, spirituality, community make the sacraments special, not just routine. Most of our sacraments can be offered to anyone, no membership required. I'm going to give the listeners a challenge in my close to keep a sacrament journal. I know, I know, nobody wants to keep a journal, but just hear me out on this one. Every time you are involved in a sacrament, every single one, whether you be, whether it be as a doer, or as a receiver, journal about it. See the experience through all of your senses. Listen in silence as you reflect on that experience. See it through the eyes of God. See it through the receiver or doer, whichever one you aren't. Check in from time to time with the person whom you minister to or who ministers to you. I promise it will change the way you feel about giving and receiving ministry. These sacraments are unique gifts that we have been given. Don't take them for granted. Be intentional and experience them to the fullest extent possible.

Robin Linkhart 1:10:18

Well, thank you so much for being with us today, Bill and Wendy. And a very special thanks to all of our listeners. I heard Bill and Wendy say, if you want to hear more, they are open to contacting them so I will get contact info and put those contacts in our show notes. If you would like to hear more stories about mission, check out our "What's Brewing" series. And if you want to experience a guided meditation with Wendy Brian, pull up the "Awaken to God's Presence" series at projectzionpodcast.org and look for Wendy's name in the lineup. This is your host, Robin Linkhart, and you are listening to *Project Zion Podcast*. Go out and make the world a better place. God, where will your Spirit lead today? Help me be fully awake and ready to respond. Grant me courage to risk something new. Amen.