

Holy Grounds: Spiritual Formation with Mareva Arnaud Tchong

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Robin Linkhart, Mareva Arnaud

Robin Linkhart 00:30

Hello and welcome to Project Zion Podcast. This is your host, Robin Linkhart. And today is another episode in our Holy Grounds series, where we discuss spirituality, spiritual practices, and how spirituality connects with faith in the everyday aspects of life in today's world. Today, our guest is apostle Mareva M. Arnaud Tchong. Mareva was ordained as an apostle and member of the Council of 12 apostles at the 2013 World Conference. She is assigned to the Pacific Asia Mission Field, which includes the Australia Mission Center, East Asia Mission Center, French Polynesia Mission Center, Pacific Islands Mission Center, and the Philippines Mission Center. Mareva has also served as Financial Officer and President of the French Polynesia Mission Center, and was counselor to the President of the Quorum of High Priests. Mareva is a native of Tahiti, French Polynesia. Welcome Mareva. Yourhona, Robin! We're so glad to have you with us today. Mareva, we would love to get to know a little bit more about you and your family and how you came to be a member of Community of Christ. So tell us just a little bit more about all of those things.

Mareva Arnaud 02:15

So my name is Mareva Arnaud Tchong I was born in 1968 in Tahiti in a family of seven children. That at my birth, I was adopted and recognized by a couple, George and Christa, who are my parents. We are members of the church. My father was a missionary and an employee of the local church. And by their at example, by association through education, it was like a thread in a needle. I was baptized at the age of 10. I am married to Munanui, we, we have three daughters Hariatta, Mihiatta, and Ariata. We don't have to remember all their names name, three sons in law, and our children between they're 31 and 24 years old. And today, we have two grandchildren are Ahiinororai and Mareva. And I live on the island of Tahiti, the capital island of French Polynesia, and I have been working for the church for 20 years now. And before working for the church, I worked in one of the most popular fashion and set shops in Tahiti. What I can say... I like to garden, to read, to do activity on the water especially boogie boards and surfing. And I speak two languages fluently. Tahitian is the first one. French, the second one. I learned English in college, and I'm doing the best I can. And I can understand a little bit of Spanish which I also studied in college. I think that's enough.

Robin Linkhart 03:08

Mm Hmm. Like a thread through a needle. Mm Hmm. You do very well very well. In my recent trip to French Polynesia. I was asked to facilitate a class and I of course taught that class in English because I do not speak French or Tahitian. And, Mareva was my interpreter and so she was just keeping up minute by minute second by second with Tahitian no excuse me now Tahitian and French, and we had a PowerPoint in French, and we got it done. But Mareva was a miracle worker. So you grew up in a family that was already members of Community of Christ. You were 10 years old when you got baptized. So the church, Community of Christ, has been part of your life for as long as you can remember. How would you describe your faith journey as you grew from childhood, to young adult, and to now? We know seasons of life can be different in our discipleship, as we grow. So tell us a little bit about your journey.

Mareva Arnaud 05:53

So, at the beginning, my faith was unconsciously I think, shaped by my parents, my education at home and in church. And, as a child, I never asked myself questions never, never, never. Education in a Polynesian family, It made it obvious that on Sunday, we go to church, no question. It's the way it is. But when I was a child and a young person, going to church, being in church activities is part of my life, and I was in the choir, was in this book club of the congregation participating in children or youth camp. It was not really... maybe like kind of required action. I was in the mood my cultures and at that time, an innocent faith and that innocent faith would develop naturally through the love of my parents, the joy, you feel when you're surrounded, (with) a big family. And we have to know that here in French Polynesia, at that time, 99% of the population were Christian, completely embedded in a religious Christian faith. All around everywhere you go. It's like that. All was closed on Sunday in the past, because everyone went, all the people were in church, it's different churches, but everyone, was in a church went to church. So my faith was naturally growing. In 1998, I think I started working as a volunteer at the mission center. And then I think the church office encouraged me to attend more deeply in classes, and time to learn deeper about Jesus, about mission, about the church, because in the past, at my stake, led me into the choir, I was just thinking and I was happy. It was enough for me. I was in the spot of the church, it was it was enough for me. But I did not see on the (...) I didn't actually understand what's happening. But during that time, in my youth and young adult time, I began to learn and I began to have this faith, doubting about... doubting about anything. I was convinced I was losing a lot, and maybe maybe too much, maybe too much questions to myself first, and to everyone. And that, there was even a period when I got deeply involved in the knowledge of my culture. And the more I read about missionaries and their practices long, long, long time ago here, the more I became anti-everything, anti-Christian, I was thinking a lot and seeking. Each time I look for more. each time I was troubled, and each time my faith certainly in God grew up. And is still growing, and always growing. So I believe my my journey of faith does not stop here.. And I hope, I know I will discover more about my faith journey.

Robin Linkhart 10:09

As long as I've known you, Mareva and I met you in the Community of Christ seminary, which I started attending in 2003. So it was between 2003-2007 that we first met, but as long as I've known you, you have been a living example of a disciple that continues to learn and grow and deepen your faith, and your expression of ministry. It's an inspiration. Thank you for sharing all that with us. It sounds like, like you had quite an active childhood. In the church, as you say, it was a natural extension of the context of

your culture that was 99%, Christian and your family was faithful in their attendance, that you were engaged in a lot of different activities as a young person, and in your college and growing years, going deep and learning about not just our church, but learning about the history of French Polynesia and early, early missionaries. And, going through what many young people go through kind of that idealism and being anti everything as you say. But always seeking that intensive quality, you have to just seek and search and connect your growing faith. Wonderful. I'm sure many listeners can connect with your description of that. So you started volunteering at the mission center office in 1998. Before we go on to learn more about your history with spiritual practices, can you tell us a little bit about kind of the timeline of your engagement as far as leadership? So 1998, you were volunteering in the Mission Center? Did you hold priesthood at that time?

Mareva Arnaud 12:20

No, No, No. No. I don't know what happened. I think..I don't know well whatever. I don't know what happened at that time. I was volunteer as a reception(ist).

Robin Linkhart 12:42

Okay.

Mareva Arnaud 12:44

Acutally, I was phone call, you know, like I did temporary?

Robin Linkhart 12:48

Yes, yes. Yes.

Mareva Arnaud 12:53

When I came back from a World Conference with a group of young adults of my congregation, and I was completely caught off guard with this. I heard a testimony from an African brother. And my, and my, my husband today, we were not married at the time then. And, we were we were questioning about our lives it was a nice life, a really nice life. And we heard, we heard this brother from Africa, sharing his life, and we said, like, "My, my God, we were completely outside of what, what God is asking us to do." And so I came back, I volunteered with the, with the permission of Munanui to be to work, it was normally two times a week. And I stayed all week, and after the mission center president, one year, no two months later asked me if I can assist in the bishopric here. And it was counting the little coins. When, when the pastor come to them with the money I was counting the little coins. And after doing copies and I was employed at that time. And after that, Arthur Smith was invited as a theologian for education, and I assisted him, he needed an assistant in the Temple School. And when he left, Tahiti, French Polynesia I replaced him and I became counselor for the MCP at that time, and I became the MCP and the financial officer later.

Robin Linkhart 14:58

And when were you first ordained to priesthood?

Mareva Arnaud 15:02

I was ordained as an elder, I can't remember the date. But, I remember the time when my pastor came to me and said, I was working at the mission center and married after that. And he said, Mareva with many nice words, you are called to the priesthood. And I was shocked. The first thing I said is, "You know that I'm dancing?" Because I was dancing in the traditional Tahitian group traditional and that was not allowed. It was it was the beginning of opening dance in the church, but not, not really accepted by all. And he said, "Oui!" And so I accepted to be doing that. Voila! And after that, I was ordained as a High Priest.

Robin Linkhart 16:02

High Priest and you became Mission Center president.

Mareva Arnaud 16:07

Before, (ordained high priest) before.

Robin Linkhart 16:09

Right? Alright. And now you serve in the office of apostle. Did you ever serve in the office of bishop or it was high priest?

Mareva Arnaud 16:18

No. High priest. Oui.

Robin Linkhart 16:19

Okay. Great. Inquiring minds want to know, we always ask all kinds of questions. Okay. Now we're ready to dive into our topic of spiritual formation and practices. In your time, as a follower of Jesus Christ, and you look back on that time, how did you first learn about or discover spiritual practices?

Mareva Arnaud 16:49

I discovered spiritual practices without knowing that it was a spiritual practice. Here when we have worship in the church, especially when you go on islands, other islands than Tahiti because the church is everywhere on islands, especially when you go on these islands. They have a kind of organizing worship, there's always something different. Let me show you an example. I remember one day I was in a camp with you a long, long time ago. And you were walking at half past five in the morning, oui, in the village, with a pajama and our blanket, it's cold. And we are walking, maybe for twenty minutes, to go at the end of the island, and to worship. In front of the rising sun.

Robin Linkhart 17:57

Ahhh, the Rising Sun.

Mareva Arnaud 18:01

Rising sun. And for us it was not normal, but it was a way to worship—never felt that it was a spiritual practice. After, we heard more and more about this spiritual practice. And today I am more intentional. And I'm learning other way to do, ways to do even though I'm still keeping the ones I used to do in the past.

Robin Linkhart 18:43

Yeah, it's... having visited French Polynesia a couple times. It felt to me that the culture of the people incorporates spirituality in a way that is just naturally a deeper connection with Spirit and the integration of Spirit and physical naturally occurring. So are there other ways that your culture and context have impacted your understanding of spirituality as you've experienced the church really raising our awareness and teaching us things?

Mareva Arnaud 19:29

The trip to (journey of) Polynesian culture in the past, was colored by colonization culture and enveloped by other traditions. And so, being young my spirituality was more influenced by what the church culture teach me, taught me. But over time, it has developed and been enriched through a growing understanding of the gospel of course, the church. But also today we are more and more claiming our Polynesian culture. Today something here and contextual impacts my life, my understanding of spirituality. I see spirituality in a tattoo. Y

Robin Linkhart 20:39

You see spirituality in tattoos?

Mareva Arnaud 20:45

Traditional tattoo, I can see, I can see and I understand the symbols on that person. I think that that can be spiritual, probably. too. I see mutuality in the ocean. In the traditional dance, we need to understand that in the past, there was a time where we were not allowed to speak with Tahitian.

Robin Linkhart 21:19

Oh, okay, at the school or at church?

Mareva Arnaud 21:24

At school.

Robin Linkhart 21:24

At school.

Mareva Arnaud 21:25

But the church continue to keep the Tahitian language and French language. That's why I said that the Polynesian culture was covered by other traditions. In the church a long, long time ago, not in our church only—in the Christian church. We were not allowed to have a flower on the ear. So we had to adopt with what and who we were. Saying with this new understanding of, especially in the Community of Christ after eight, we are a people...we, we are the people worthy...that's the way you say?

Robin Linkhart 22:26

Worthy, worthy, yes hmm.

Mareva Arnaud 22:30

Okay, and we can see God in all colors in all culture. And that makes a huge change in my understanding of spirituality.

Robin Linkhart 22:43

Ohh, wow, for sure. As I'm listening to you, Mareva, I'm understanding that being colonized by the French, and then in a way, also colonized by missionaries, or at least an overlay of Christianity of the day, was just pushing down the Polynesian culture. And as life in Community of Christ has evolved, we know that we have grown and deepened in our understanding as a global church. That God is calling us to embrace all cultures and to liberate people to express the gospel in their own language and rich culture of the people where they originated. And that that has actually been a big plus in your understanding of spirituality. Did I get that right?

Mareva Arnaud 23:49

Yes. Yeah. I'm speaking only for myself.

Robin Linkhart 23:56

Yes, yes.

Mareva Arnaud 23:57

And "cause that's the way I lived from my childhood till then. And with respect of really not understand at all the Polynesian culture. I am a Polynesian, I understood. I understand the language. I understood the language, but not really doing like. We have not really in the church, legends, legends. Polynesian legends, and church was naturally side by side in the past.

Robin Linkhart 24:42

Uh huh.

Mareva Arnaud 24:44

But to eyes on the church those who have eyes on the church, too much flowers were on you with eyes on the church. You can think and so, spirituality..I'm not saying it's bad. I'm saying spirituality was different. But today, we can see in society, and we can see us in the church that we are claiming to have universal. Of course for our name is the for the world, especially recognition of the church. But also being recognized as being Polynesian, with our own understanding on aspect of life, and our own history.

Robin Linkhart 25:40

Yes, I'm glad that we're in a different place now of of understanding and embracing all of that together. In your growing, evolving sense of spirituality, what spiritual practice do you use to best connect with God with the Divine and why? Why does that work for you?

Mareva Arnaud 26:09

So, let's a spiritual practice to connect me the best is when I am under water or in the water. But I don't actually take the opportunity to do that one. So, there, the second one who connects me the best is when I sit on the ground, on the ground on the grass or on the on the dirt. The underground connection

with Mother Earth. I like to read text several times and most of these texts come from the Bible or other books comes from hymns. And I choose the text and the book according to my most my mood. I like to close eyes to focus on the silence or the sounds of life. And and let the Spirit or the text act in me. And when I did that there were times when I ended with a completely new understanding of the text or of life. But I like to be connected with the water or with the earth, Mother Earth.

Robin Linkhart 27:50

So, if you were going to guide someone in a spiritual practice, what might you suggest for someone either as a description of that step by step for them, or even leading us through that now with you as we listen.

Mareva Arnaud 28:13

So let me try something properly and breathe calmly And put your hands on your legs or on your knees. Your hands held up to the sky open to the sky. And take just a few seconds to think about what your hands have done for you in recent days. How your hands were blessing for others And inside of yourself pray saying "Lord let my hands be yours and a/the blessing for your creation." So, after that you can open your eyes I did this it's a short act. You can do the same with the feet, with your heart, your eyes, your ears, your head to reflect calmly about what your head, your eyes did for you and how they can be a blessing, they can be blessing for others. Reflect on that, and pray God to use you and your whole being for God's purpose. That's a little example of a spiritual practice. Easy. And I think, helpful for us.

Robin Linkhart 31:40

I love it. I love it. So as you were walking us through that I, I closed my eyes and followed with you. And even in a brief spiritual practice of opening and introspection, review of how how my hands had been used in the past few days. And on through the practice, it was, it was a blessing to have those few moments of reflection and introspection. That is perfect. I love it. One of the things I love about it is it's something that a person could do almost anywhere,

Mareva Arnaud 32:27

Everywhere, anywhere, yes.

Robin Linkhart 32:32

Mareva, some of our listeners are new to spiritual practices. Do you have any tips for folks who might be trying out practices for the first time, or even maybe this practice that you introduced today was the first time they've tried something like that? Any tips for people new to practices?

Mareva Arnaud 32:57

I think we think it has to be simple. And not so much the thing to reflect on sometimes, especially the beginning, too much a question can destroy the concentration. That's what I think. It's possible to have spiritual practice like in silence when you you pray in silence in yourself, but if it's useful to just speak out loud. That alone that's I think at the beginning, it's really good. Being true to yourself. Because, they sometimes... don't control. That's the thing I wanted to say. When we say too much we are controlling our thoughts and our feelings. But just being true to yourself and it true because when you're true to

yourself sometimes you discover things you never thought about, and you cry, and you laugh. No reason. No reason. and let the Spirit touch and guide.

Robin Linkhart 34:39

These are great tips. Great tips. Let the Spirit guide. Be true to yourself. Also for people who might be new to spiritual practices, can you tell us a little bit about how having a practice or doing a daily practice for you can impact your day?

Mareva Arnaud 35:07

My day, like many of us, is full, often full of many things, activities, things to think about experiences of all kinds. And spiritual practices allow me to intentionally loosen myself and to take time to make a connection with the Spirit. I know that the Spirit is everywhere, everywhere. Like, that's my time to connect with the Spirit through the research for the divine in myself each time And also, I'm opening myself more to like the light. <Uh huh.> And I know, calm I more soothing, soothing, that's the way we say it?

Robin Linkhart 36:08

More calm. What, what was the other more calm and more?

Mareva Arnaud 36:13

Like serenity.

Robin Linkhart 36:15

Oh, serenity, more serenity,

Mareva Arnaud 36:17

Yes, more strong to myself, I did that at the beginning of the day. That's my discipline, initial discipline. I believe that this has an impact on my relationship with my.. with the people I need. That that has an impact on the Spirit that I share with those I meet on my path in the day. This spiritual practice has an impact on the thoughts and the decisions that I make. It's really helpful for, for me for my development, and for the harmony of my mind and body.

Robin Linkhart 37:00

I love that it's helpful for good development. And harmony of your body? Oh, that's great. That is great. You've talked a little bit about doing a group experience when as a youth you woke up really early in the morning on the island in pajamas and blankets, everybody walked to the end of the island to be present and experience the rising of the sun. And you've also shared about individual experiences. How are those different for you? And how do you find them meaningful in different ways? Are there different aspects of those that connect? Is there, is it easier for you one way or the other?

Mareva Arnaud 38:00

No. Spiritual practice comes and you take it as it comes.

Robin Linkhart 38:09

Ahh.

Mareva Arnaud 38:14

Practice alone or in a group is as powerful as the other. It depends on where you are in your journey and your need. But both are powerful. For example, doing it alone allows freedom in organization and you can be more focused on what you are and what you're called to do. As a group, your organization must be more communicated. And the effect of being in a group, I think sometimes motivate. It's like a small candle, which when gathered together, increase the luminosity. So that's the image I had for the spiritual practice in a group. But more times loneliness is what we need.

Robin Linkhart 39:28

I love the image of a single candle. In a group we each bring one small candle and when it's gathered together, wherever you are, it increases the illumination of those gathered candles. But also sometimes the need is to be alone to find that illumination. Are there any spiritual...

Mareva Arnaud 39:58

There is a quote...

Robin Linkhart 40:01

I'm sorry, can you say that again?

Mareva Arnaud 40:09

I guess that there is a quote to say, "loneliness calls for the multitude."

Robin Linkhart 40:16

Loneliness calls for the multitude. <Oui> That's deep. That's a deeply profound quote. Are there any spiritual practice that you've personally find challenging or difficult to do? Understanding—and I think you kind of alluded to this earlier is—be true to yourself and who you are. That not all spiritual practices are going to be a good fit. Are there some that you have found difficult or that you, you have found not to be a good fit?

Mareva Arnaud 41:03

I think that, from my personal experience, all spiritual practices were great. The time where it was not working for me, when I was not convinced, it was when I was doubting about, about many things. And when I am asked to do a spiritual practice, and I'm not ready to do it. Or I am, when I..I need, I need to agree. <Yes.> And sometimes to be convinced that this was a good time, this is a good time. I don't know if you understand? My...

Robin Linkhart 42:07

Yeah. I do. Indeed, I think there can be times, when we're asked to participate in a spiritual practice, or someone in the class is encouraging us on our own time, you really need to engage in spiritual practice, there can be times when there's a resistance inside of us, that we're not in a place where we can be open to that, or there are other reasons, even just needing to come to it at your own time. That we're just not we're not available in a way and that it's those times when it does feel like it's challenging. Or it

becomes in a sense, ..more of a disconnect than a reconnect because we're just not in a place where we're open to that. Mareva, you are the apostle for many different nations, and they have many different cultures and contexts. How do you see diverse people in your field integrating spiritual practices into their daily lives as well as their life together as a congregation?

Mareva Arnaud 43:24

So I see a big difference in number. And in congregation, I think, recall from from Steve Veazey. In the past, and encouraging, the church to use spiritual practices has made a big impact on us, and in combination. They are more intention to include a spiritual practice, even though in different cultures there, there are islands or countries. It's easy for them like closing the eyes, like or, or this reflection, but other it was really hard. Because closing the eyes for a few scriptures, just is not what they used to do, then only in praying. A prayer is a spiritual practice. But when you begin to ask close your eyes and reflect on an ... and ask a question. It's so hard for many. But I can see today in all these spiritual in the field a huge improvement. And in society, we see our young adult are really connected with spirituality, in yoga, in meditation, of course, in different, different activities. And so when they can come to church, they come as though with their experiences and that's great. And adapt in a more like reflection about God, a reflection about the Spirit, a reflection about your ministry, about your being your well being, I see a big difference. They need to see me to continue to work on that path.

Robin Linkhart 45:43

That is so interesting to hear. And one of the things that interests me that you said is that you're seeing in... across your field, the increased attention of young people to spirituality and awareness of that, and even a hunger for that. It, it sounds to me like that is something that's trending across humanity now, because we see that in many nations, all over the globe. It's also interesting to hear you report the observation that President Veazey's call to the church for a spiritual awakening has had an impact. I see that as well in my field. Mareva, is there anything that you would like to share with us today that I did not ask you about

Mareva Arnaud 46:37

Spiritual practice is the path, it's the path we usually work in small steps. But where each step, each step is a priceless gift. I realized the value of this gift. And as you nourish your body every day, we are called to nourish also our soul with a spiritual nourishment. And there are no secret, I think there's no secret to this. It is very, very important. To devote time, to study, to prayer. But also to be really intentional to discipline ourselves to go deep in meditation and spiritual practices. For seeking the best of us, the answer of our being and of our call. It's awesome today. Especially when we have a lot of things happening in our lives, challenges in the world and to be more efficient. For for yourself, and for helping supporting others. We need to be nourished, to be strong in our mind, and soul.

Robin Linkhart 48:41

That is such a good reminder to us. And also your reminder that it's especially important when we are busy when we are challenged when we have so much going on which can seem like the most difficult time to be intentional and yet and even counter intuitive and yet it's even more important in those times in many regards. Mareva, are there any resources that you might recommend to our listeners to help them go deeper or discover practices?

Mareva Arnaud 49:22

So I'm reading two books in French I'm watching a lot of movies or videos about meditation and spiritual practices today. And I'm reading a lot. I don't have specific kinds. I grew up with singers, I can have I have a few books and I seem to remember these books. And there was a group written so by Carolyn Brock <Uh huh> I can't remember the title, but it was my first book about spiritual practice and I still had it for me. So I can have, you can find different ways to do it. It's not always the same. If you've got a route.

Robin Linkhart 50:36

Yes, there are a lot of things available to us now. Carolyn Brock, who is a longtime minister with Community of Christ, and I believe was our first spiritual formation specialist employed by the church did a lot of writing. So if you're interested, you can Google Carolyn Brock, even go to CofChrist.org and put in the search box, Carolyn Brock, and you might be able to, I'm sure it'll pull up several different things. But I'm gonna...go ahead.

Mareva Arnaud 51:08

I'm sure I am sure that there are many conferences about well being, spiritual well being. So if we have the opportunity, we just need sometimes to be, take care of, sometimes it's extremist (expensive), but they're good. They're good at conferences about spirituality.

Robin Linkhart 51:39

Yes, look in your area for spiritual conferences or gatherings. Also, if you look at CofChrist.org Katie Harmon McLaughlin is doing several different online spiritual formation gatherings so you can check that out as well. And we have a spiritual formation page on CofChrist.org with all the latest information Mareva, thank you so much for being with us today. We are doing this online. I just left French Polynesia late Saturday evening, day before last and we just did not have opportunity to cram this into our time together and decided to do it online. So Mareva is very early in the day and I'm a little bit later in my current timezone. So thank you Moravia for making time to share with us.

Mareva Arnaud 52:42

Merci!

Robin Linkhart 52:44

A very special thanks to all of our listeners here on Project Zion Podcast. If you would like to hear more from people who actively practice spirituality in their lives, look for our series Holy Grounds in the categories list on our website, ProjectZionpodcast.org. This is your host Robin Linkhart. And you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. Until next time, Goodbye.