

Grounds for Peace | Citizen Diplomacy

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

citizen diplomacy, experience, years, Nikita Khrushchev, doubt, Des Moines, audacious, community

SPEAKERS

Chuck Montgomery, Robin Linkhart

Robin Linkhart 00:29

Hello and welcome to Grounds for Peace, a Project Zion Podcast series, where we explore what it looks like to follow Jesus the peaceful one, and ask difficult questions about how people of faith can make a difference in today's world. I'm your host, Robin Linkhart. I'm here with Chuck Montgomery. And today we are talking about citizen diplomacy. Hey, Chuck, welcome. It's great to have you with us today on Project Zion Podcast.

Chuck Montgomery 01:00

Thank you, Robin for this opportunity.

Robin Linkhart 01:04

So Chuck, today is your first time to guest on our podcast. And I would love it if we could take a few minutes to get to know you maybe start with like your elevator intro if you have to tell somebody who you are, where you live, what you do and that kind of thing.

Chuck Montgomery 01:21

Sure. I'm a lifelong resident of Des Moines, Iowa except four years away for college. I'm married to Doris Porter Montgomery, from Columbus, Ohio. I'm the father of Matt, Julie, and Kimmy, and the grandfather of Alex, Tessa, Coco, Lennon and Reese ranging from four to 13 years. I'm a retired attorney for MidAmerican Energy Company. I spent 36 years there, after a prior job and spent the last 20 years roughly getting permission to build and to set straight the cost recovery for about 7500 megawatts of wind generation, which was a nice way to cap the career. I attend Northwest congregation in Des Moines, I'm a lifelong member of Community of Christ. My family goes back quite a ways in the church. Grew up going to camps, both as a camper and a staffer. It was a high point of my youth. Pivotal experience for me was in Iowa City. When I was going to school there, the congregation there was magical and gave me a great foundation to launch from there. That's about it.

Robin Linkhart 02:37

That's wonderful. I love hearing people's stories. Today we're here to talk about a concept called Citizen Diplomacy. And Chuck, you connected with this movement for the first time about 20 years ago. And, my understanding is you've continued ever since. Tell us about citizen diplomacy and how you got involved.

Chuck Montgomery 03:02

Definitionally, it's styled as the concept that the individual has the right, even the responsibility to help shape US foreign relations, one handshake at a time, I think that kind of captures it. My involvement in large part is rooted in my daughter, my oldest daughter's experience. She led me down a couple of paths. Initially, a group in the early 2000s, called the Iowa Council for International Understanding. She was an intern there during the summer. She, and I should say that ICIU is a contractor with the US State Department in the International Visitor Leadership Program where they bring over hundreds of people every year, I think they brought over 200,000 in their existence, and I'm speaking here to the State Department, not ICIU. But they bring them here and they've been identified by the embassy in their home nation as promising future leaders. They come here and spend weeks, and ICIU was one of the contractors that made their trip to Des Moines useful and that they were comfortable and had a good experience. My daughter went to Graceland. She played soccer there and got to know John Menzies who was president of Graceland. Just brand new actually. And John loved women's soccer and was pretty near at every game. I found out she was interested in international relations. That was a love of his of course as a former ambassador. And we got to know each other through Julie. And he invited me, he was the founding president of the US center for citizen diplomacy. He recruited me to be the treasurer of that organization. Why, I'll never know because I'm not a financial person. But I had a great experience there and really appreciated not only his involvement in her life, but mine. I'm sorry, we've lost him. It was a big loss. And finally, Cultural, an organization here in central Iowa, that is all about sending what we call ambassadors into the schools to give a poignant presentation that kids will remember, and they're coached through this. And they find hooks that will help the kids remember the experience as they introduce the culture they're from, regardless of the continent, they're from a great organization. So through those three groups, I got involved in citizen diplomacy. Probably the most important of which, and poignant for me was the US Center for Citizen Diplomacy.

Robin Linkhart 05:49

So can you tell us anything else about some of the efforts that you've seen this movement connected with, up until recently? Any other stories?

Chuck Montgomery 06:01

Yes. For me, personally, the most poignant experience was in the early, mid 2000s, about 2005-2006. It was after 9/11, there was still a lot of friction, distrust between the Middle East and the United States, sort of parts of the Middle East. And we worked in here, I mean, the US center for citizen diplomacy, work with a group out of New York City called business for diplomatic action, kind of a form of Citizen Diplomacy centered in business. Kevin Reinhart was the founder and just a magnificent individual. We brought dozens in three different tranches over three years of promising young business people from the Middle East, from Jordan, Egypt, the Palestinian territories, the Gulf countries, and so on. And they were young, they had been identified by a group called Young Arab Leaders, which is like the Young Presidents Club here in the United States. And these, again, most were in their 20s, early 30s. We fell in love with these kids. They came, they were scared, their parents were worried sending them to the United States, They told us that. I think the first impression that was made that this may be an okay place in Des Moines, Iowa, was that it was so quiet, they got off the plane. And they said, It's so quiet here. They'd spent a week in New York and a week in Washington, so you could kind of understand that reaction. So over the course of taking them to our businesses, going out to dinner with them,

spending hours and hours socially with them, they just wowed us. I mean, the loving, kind, humble, honest, and open interaction that we had just totally won us over. And I think the reverse happened to. And I guarantee you that people felt differently at the end of that, and a lot of tears were shed, at the closing dinner. We've stayed in contact, I actually met them, spent time with him in New York City. And subsequent years and on the way back from Pakistan. I stopped in Abu Dhabi, and we all went out to dinner. And we've stayed very close, we've helped each other through some tough times. Don't have contact with all of them, but certainly a lot of them. And it was just I think a paradigm of what happens in a good citizen diplomacy interaction. Another experience that's maybe a little more organizational oriented, as opposed to individual, but ultimately comes down to individuals was something we call Global Pro Bono. It's a program of Pyxera Global, which is the nonprofit where I served for a number of years as a board member. They ultimately took over the US Center for Citizen Diplomacy. And this Global Pro Bono program assists major employers in this country. IBM has been a part of it for a number of years. They're not currently. 3M, SAP, FedEx, and the like. We help them formulate programs where they go through a pretty involved selection process and select employees who have skills in areas needed for the kind of project they want to undertake. And then we assist them, Pyxera Global, to send skills-based volunteers to countries around the globe. So I was privileged to go to Ghana to see the launch of this project. And we were at a meeting in Accra involving IBM, the kind of sponsoring Corporation. And there are many employees who are very impressive. And I should say, they spend months getting ready for this mission, and communicate with people in country and other players before they go. This is what happens all the time and these programs that are carried on. So, IBM was there. The Ghanaian entrepreneur who had created this platform that would facilitate communicating and making available on a regular basis to kids in the rural areas, the curriculum of the of the Ministry of Education. The Peace Corps was involved the US Peace Corps, because they're everywhere in Ghana, my brother had served there and I visited and I know really well what they do there. It's an amazing operation. But a key thing in all this was that cell phones are really prevalent, and I'm sure you've experienced that too, on the African continent. They're ahead of us in many ways with cell technology. So we could get curriculum to the kids via their cell phones. It just required this platform being put up in IBM, and its ability to scale up what this entrepreneur had created. And then the Ghanaian Ministry of Education was involved for obvious reasons, too. It was a inspiring experience. It's another kind of aspect of citizen diplomacy. It's more, I hesitate to say bureaucracy because it has negative connotations, but it was, you know, organizations involved. And the individual reach was through this platform and the cell phones to young people in rural Ghana. It doesn't have to be that big and involved to be a citizen diplomat. One of my favorite stories, is something I saw on Fareed Zakaria GPS, one Sunday. That story, as I recall, was entitled American French Fry Brother. This college student who was going to school in China, went into a McDonald's, ordered a hamburger, fries and a drink, went out, sat down on the curb to eat it, and looked over and notice that there was a homeless woman by all appearances seated next to him who was looking at his food. And he didn't feel comfortable with that. He promptly got up, went back into McDonald's bought another one came out, sat down next to her and gave it to her. And they shared their hamburger and drink and fries together. I don't know that he actually noticed it. But people had taken out their phones, and we're videoing this. And it went viral in China, millions of people saw that. And he became known amongst the people that viewed it as the American French Fry Brother, I mean, just having the presence of mind and sense of generosity that he did in that situation, probably impacted more people than, you know, a lot of projects that are taken on in the name of citizen diplomacy. So it doesn't require a lot of time. It's a certain

mindset I think. Another example, and this actually involves a lot of work. involved the Mennonites, there were a series of articles I read by Barb Slavin, who kind of specializes in the Middle East and Iran in particular. There had been an earthquake in Iran several years ago, and it was pretty severe. And a large number of Mennonites went to Iran. They didn't want a high-profile assignment, they went out into the hinterland and sacrificially helped people. And it's so impressed the Iranians, that a couple of years later, when a number of religious scholars, women, came to the US and attended a conference, one of the things high on their agenda was to go to Ohio or Pennsylvania, I can't remember which they wanted to see these Mennonite people where they lived, and see what made them tick. Why did these people do this? And I think that's the poignant thing that happens often, particularly when you've got two countries that have fraught relations. It's happened in the case of Russia, China, Japan, in stories that I'm sure we'll cover eventually, because they're in the documentary, and it happened here and it doesn't convert people overnight. But it creates a little bit of doubt in their mind about the preconceived notion they had about the other. And I think Community of Christ folk are so good at this because they're practiced and skilled at loving other people even sacrificially, and creating that kind of moment of doubt where someone has an opportunity to change their view of things. One other experience, I'll go through it quickly, but, I was privileged again to go overseas, in this case to Pakistan in 2011. And it was a fraught time. There were a lot of frictions between the two countries, and there have been for decades. We went to college campus and Lahore, Lahore University of Management and Science, it's kind of the Harvard of Pakistan really. And a lot of folks, both from Pakistan and the United States gathered in this campus and spent the first day being very, very honest with each other about our assessment of the other country in the policy that was practiced toward our country. And that's a good way to start a relationship, I think, based on that experience, where you've got that kind of history. And so a lot of honesty was put out on the table. And the next day, we came back and said, well, the purpose of this conference is to see what we can do together to begin making deeper relationships and working, you know, outside of government, in certain areas. And those were education, religion, government, and agriculture. And one of the most impressive things to me that came out of that was in the religious sphere. There were representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And they met I think, three more times. And did a number of things. But the thing that really impressed me is, and we heard this over and over from the Pakistanis is that they were hurt, and could not understand why a country like the United States would send drones into the areas they did that led to the deaths of many, many Pakistani civilians. I mean, one woman cried, you know, to me, as she explained how that impacted her and her impression of the United States. Why were we doing that? This group of religious leaders couldn't agree on policy and lots of aspects of that issue. What they could agree on was that innocent people were being hurt. And they put together a fundraising operation to raise money to relieve the pain and suffering of those families that experienced those deaths. And I think that, you know, really has made an impact on those involved, and those that were served.

Robin Linkhart 17:58

Those are incredibly powerful stories Chuck, each one different. And yet there's this common thread of human relationship. Two things that you said, one was, in the sharing, the french fries, this "presence of mind, and sense of generosity," this synchronicity of those two postures in a sense, that moved a young man to do what he did and feed a woman and not just give her the food, but to sit with her and eat together, further claiming that which binds us together in our condition of humanity. And another thing you said so many powerful things, but "the moment of doubt about preconceived notions," that it's

like a little window that opens and when we allow that moment of doubt, or reconsideration, that can, as you know, can be a seed of change, change of understanding transformation, just super, super powerful. Okay, so in November of 2023, Iowa PBS released the documentary, Citizen Diplomacy, tell us about that project, and maybe how you see it, it's content, connecting with things like peacemaking efforts or peacemaking skills, or a variety of actions that anyone could practice locally, nationally or globally.

Chuck Montgomery 19:58

I became aware of what I call the "big three" events in Iowa history in the realm of Citizen Diplomacy through my involvement in those organizations I mentioned. And, really felt there was a vacuum in terms of communicating that adequately the power of what had been done on a global scale. And so, overtime really developed the idea that if someone was willing, we really needed a documentary put together that would describe what had happened. So not only Iowans, but hopefully people around the country. And some of that starting to happen. And even globally, that's moving a little slower, could see this story, and start to contemplate citizen diplomacy in their own heritage in their own state or their own country. And I'm sure it's out there. And I'm sure that there will be moments of inspiration when they contemplate that and contemplate the documentary. And I'm hoping there'll be a doubling down in these realms of citizen diplomacy. So, I went to Iowa PBS upon retirement or around the time of retirement, and the general manager there, Molly Phillips, was gracious enough to invite me in to talk. I took a concept memo with me and I said, this is my dream, I beg you, please put this down on film, because some of the people that can tell the story the best aren't going to be here in a few years. And she agreed, right off. It was wonderful. And she brought me together with production staff, we went over it. Dave Miller, Senior Producer and Director of Iowa PBS, took this on. I think he became a believer. He did a magnificent job in telling the story, putting the people together, and hopefully people will see the documentary and understand what I'm what I'm saying. But the three the big three that I'm referring to are the Roswell Garst, Iowa farmer in western Iowa and Nikita Khrushchev developed the relationship that Roswell Garst initiated. Xi Jinping, as a 30-something lower-level bureaucrat, came to Iowa, spent better part of a week in Muscatine, Iowa and southeast Iowa, had the kind of experience I think we had with the young Arab fellow. He speaks to this day of how warm he feels about that experience. And he proves it. When he came back in 2012 to the United States, he insisted on going to Muscatine to see his, quote, old friends. He just invited them to San Francisco last week to the APEC conference, he wanted to have dinner with them again. They go to China. They're treated royally. And something happened there. The other thing of the Big Three is the Iowa Hog Lift, less known, but are really satisfying. In 1960, back-to-back typhoons hit the Yamanashi section of Japan, wiped out for the most part, their hog population. And there was a young sergeant who had been stationed in Japan for some time, loved Japan, said I gotta do something about this. And he was from Iowa. He was in the Air Force. He called back home. He got the right people aligned together, three dozen hogs got the Air Force to fly them to Japan. All but one made it. Today, we have a sister city-sister state relationship with the Yamanashi area. Lots of good things flow from that. They've sent things to Iowa over time, including a beautiful bell and structure that holds it that is very functional, sits on the Capitol grounds here in Des Moines. They've sent money to us when Iowa has been hit by floods. Again, it touched people. They say, our Governor, former governor indicates that the percentage grows with the amount of Saki that's been consumed. There is a significant part of the population of hogs in this region of Japan. Probably 40% is the figure that sounds most believable that I've heard, that has their genetic

heritage and those three dozen hogs that went there from Iowa. There are parts of major hog operations that are called the Iowa section that relate and allude back to this experience. So, much better than I, Dave Miller has told this story with video and his wonderful, generous voice. He does a very, very nice job. I hope you watch it. I know you have Robin, and I appreciate that. In terms of what do these cases demonstrate, I think they demonstrate that the nature of outreach that works is personal, it's real, and it's sustained. And if you do that, it has an impact that lasts a long time. And we were talking about doubt. On the 50th anniversary of Nikita Khrushchev's visit to Roswell Garst's farm in western Iowa, we had a huge celebration in Des Moines. His son was not there, but appeared via video. An author who had written about both Khrushchevs, father and son, spoke. And the thing that I took away from it that was so meaningful to me was he said he had reviewed Nikita Khrushchev's diaries, in preparing for the biography. And there's a lot of doubt expressed, and why is this capitalist coming to Russia? And why on earth would he want to make the food production of his enemy better? He eventually gave up trying to figure it out. And I think just concluded that there was something there, he didn't understand. But most importantly, that creative doubt, was initiated. And, you know, he in Roswell Garst, his Garst's grandmother refers to them as both being peasants, very basic, simple, plain spoken people. And I think, you know, that was a big part of their chemistry. That he was touched by what was being done, and it had a huge impact on agriculture. In Russia, I think it was largely in Ukraine, which is kind of the breadbasket of Russia and Europe, for that matter. The Iranians, I think, in the Mennonite experience, had doubt, you know, like, what these people care, and they're not even near the TV cameras, they don't want credit for it. Why would they do that? And they, and they had that creative doubt. And they acted on it. So when they came to the United States, and had the chance, where did they go, Pennsylvania, and they wanted to see what made them tick. And knowing the Mennonites, I think they really impressed them. They're loving people. Xi Jinping felt it. Over and over again, he talks about his old friends. And it's seemingly genuine. I mean, it didn't just happen, once it's happened four or five or six times, both in China and here in Iowa and San Francisco most recently. So if you mean it, and you show that you mean it, and you do it in a sustained way, it can have a real impact. Some will oppose what you're doing. In each of those big three cases, there were many people that resisted what was being done, not only resisted it, but spoke out strongly against it. Roswell Garst was called a communist. People cancelled purchase of seed corn from him for that reason. He was reviled. Time has been good to him. People see now the wisdom of what he did. And I think these three instances point out the need for audaciousness. At times, you know, don't be afraid to focus where the greatest threats to peace may be. And, you know, in the 1950s, and 60s, what could have been the most audacious act you would take? Help the Soviet Union, really? Help China? People are still opposed to that. Help Japan? A lot of people spoke out against the Hog Lift, and when Japanese actually visited the United States, were very opposed, in connection with the hog lift, were very opposed to their presence here. So US skills I think, I think the skills that good citizen diplomacy requires but also good Community of Christ members, is a sense of imagination of what can be. It doesn't require any particular personality style. I mean, the personalities and styles of the individuals involved in these big three instances. Were very different Richard Thomas who really brainstormed the Iowa Hog Lift was a pretty shy person. You need sincerity of expression of caring to other persons. Who does that better than Community of Christ? You need persistence, because they may not take you serious at first, and in these cases probably didn't. And you'd be need to be ready to face adversity. Because there will be if you're out on the frontier, there will be people that will oppose what you're doing. And I think that pertains domestically and internationally. So I'm, Community of Christ is very

good at the basics. We love people genuinely, I have certainly been loved to death. I mean, it's a blessing. We have a willingness to be sacrificial when needed. I certainly experienced that in Iowa City in a huge way. We have the strength and the vision to be persistent. And we have a history of surviving adversity. And those are all skills, Community of Christ holds in vast quantities. Because of what we already do.

Robin Linkhart 30:58

Well, preach it, brother, I love what you're saying. And yes, I did. Watch this wonderful documentary. And there were many times that I got tears in my eyes, because it was just so profound. And there's a certain degree of simplicity in the midst of, of these audacious actions and great effort and sacrificial effort, in fact, and but it's not rocket science, right? So it was, it had a deep impact and it was very, very inspiring. And I hear when you say focus on the greatest threats to peace, and one of the skills is a sense of imagination that just calls to mind, you know, the prophetic imagination, the call to be a prophetic people, because these audacious acts were audacious acts of positive action, affirming presence in people's lives. They were acts of love, acts of generosity. Just I'm getting the tingle factor, as Andrew Bolton would say, one of our hearts beat at this speed. So Chuck, how do you sense God calling Community of Christ into the future? What are your hopes for the church?

Chuck Montgomery 32:28

Certainly no expert on that subject. But to the extent I thought about it, because you invited me to give some thoughts about that, I'd like to see the church be the kind of force that I've experienced, that I've seen it be at its best ... centers of love, even sacrificial love, that blesses and heals others lives. And that inspire members to be community on a both local, regional and global basis. And to train up citizens that make a difference through their love and vision and insight. I mean, I think I've had the orientation I've had toward this, because of how I was raised ... because of the people I've connected with in the church, and that have been instrumental in my life. I mean, we're certainly not the exclusive place that trains up people that way, but I think we're a pretty significant one.

Robin Linkhart 33:32

I think you're right about that Chuck. I often run into young adults who may not be super active or connected with the church on a weekly basis. But whose stories continue to bear witness to the fact that the way they were shaped and formed in Community of Christ, how they came to understand the way of Jesus, has impacted their lives and the things that they choose to be involved in and support is such a faithful reflection of the basics that we learn together in Community of Christ. Loving each other, oftentimes in small congregations that are deeply connected and no strangers to adversity and challenge but are present in each other's lives consistently.

Chuck Montgomery 34:35

Well, it's so easy to take it for granted, too.

Robin Linkhart 34:38

I know. I know. The seekers that I bump into in the ministry that I support often say, Community of Christ is the best kept secret around.

Chuck Montgomery 34:55

Amen.

Robin Linkhart 34:56

Is there anything else that you want to say today that I didn't ask you? about

Chuck Montgomery 35:01

Ah, just thank you for your interest in this and willingness to talk about it. It's, it's a great help. We're trying to spread the word.

Robin Linkhart 35:07

Well, thank you for being with us today, Chuck. And as always a very special thanks to all of our listeners. If you would like to hear more stories about peas, check out our Grounds for Peace series in the drop down menu of our website, projectzionpodcast.org. If you want to learn more about citizen diplomacy, or access the documentary, which is well worth your time, check out the links in the show notes to our episode today. This is your host Robin Linkhart, and you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. Take good care, bye bye.