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SPEAKERS

Jennie Mathewson, Tessa Perry, David Howlett, Blake Smith, Becky Savage, Jane Gardner, Linda Booth, Sophia Johnson, Marge Troeh, Nevia Selmon, Charmaine Chvala-Smith, Brittany Mangelson, Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue, Madeleine Hickman

Blake Smith 00:27

Hey Project Zion Podcast listeners. It's Blake again. And continuing on our journey through the celebration of the 40th anniversary of ordination of women in Community of Christ are going back to the archives yet again. This time we'll be picking up episodes three and four from a series that originally aired in 2020 featuring host, Brittany Mangelson, and guest, David Howlett, and then also the podcasts produced by some of David Howlett's students at Smith College. In this particular episode, we'll hear the podcasts on congregational ministry and denominational ministry. Enjoy.

Brittany Mangelson 01:08

Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This is Brittany Mangelson. So I have on David Howlett. David is a scholar and a historian and a professor at Smith College in Massachusetts. And his students recently did a class project that might have some interest to the Community of Christ crowd whether you are a lifelong member or a seeker. And that project is a podcast, on women's ordination in Community of Christ. David, I'm really excited to have you on today. And why don't you share a little bit about yourself.

David Howlett 01:51

So I'm a professor, a visiting professor of religion at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. I'm a scholar of religion in America with interests also more broadly, and globalization of Christianity, pilgrimage, and in specifically the history of the Community of Christ in the late 20th century. So I've written about that in books in the past and articles. And this in particular, arises partially out of that interests, but also out of a class project where I have pedagogical goals where I'm trying to help students learn things about historical research and other kinds of skills, in this case about how do you write and produce a podcast. This particular project is about women's ordination in Community of Christ, thinking about how did that process in terms of the women's ordination movement originate?

What was it like in the 1980s, on the controversy, or women's ordination? And what were the experiences of women who are ordained. Now that in itself, it's important maybe to our audience, in terms of people being Community of Christ or interested in Community of Christ, they could find something interesting in that particular story. But it's also a story that's larger than that of talking about late 20th century American Christianity. And in the 70s, and 80s, there were lots of fights and denominations about could women be ordained, this is true also of American Jews. This is true American Buddhists. It's a much larger phenomenon. So it's a phenomenon thinking about who has access to social authority, and power and who can be empowered in a community. It goes much, much larger than a relatively small denomination. So and we see different kinds of responses of denominations everywhere. For instance, the Southern Baptists in the same time period, take away women's ordination from women who are already ordained. And so other groups give it to women who hadn't offered it before. So there's no inevitable outcome that comes in this story. And the story of our denomination, too, is a variation of the story that exists out there. There is an accompanying website along with the episodes, and the accompanying website does have some images from the archives that we have shared with permission. And it also has a student's generated essay just giving background or women's ordination in Community of Christ. And that student, by the way, quoted it Brittany Mangelson in that essay, believe it or not.

Brittany Mangelson 04:24

I noticed that actually.

David Howlett 04:26

There we go. Let's do that research on our own. I didn't point her to that at all. So I mean, she found that like, Googling, and then she's a good writer, and it's intended for someone who has no background in Community of Christ to be able to understand, well, what's going on here who's just interested in the idea of women's ordination? Yeah, the website helps situate that a little bit more to.

Brittany Mangelson 04:48

Yes, and we will be sure to link that website in the show notes so you can get more background information on the project. And yeah, thank you so much, David. Thank you for joining us in this collaboration I'm really excited about it. Well

David Howlett 05:03

thank you for hosting us and giving us this opportunity.

Madeleine Hickman 05:13

Hi, I'm Madeleine.

Nevia Selmon 05:15

I'm Nevia.

Jennie Mathewson 05:17

And I'm Jenny. We're your hosts for this episode of women's rights. This season we're exploring story of women's ordination in Community of Christ, a church with a quarter million members and formally

called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This denomination began ordaining women in 1985. And on the 35th anniversary of these first ordinations, we're taking this season to look back on the journey towards women's ordination in Community of Christ. To do so we've interviewed women ordained in the first decade after the 1985 policy change, women who went on to be leaders in Community of Christ.

Nevia Selmon 05:57

Each episode in this series investigates a different topic, and today, we're going to look at congregational ministry, specifically the first sacraments these women administered and other important exercises in their local ministry.

Jennie Mathewson 06:16

The first women ordained to Community of Christ priesthood, were often supported by their families, friends, and the church's more progressive congregations who encouraged their calls. But within a largely supportive community, many still had disconcerting experiences with others who questioned their right to the priesthood as women. Linda booth recalled one of these encounters, which has been mentioned before but helps to understand the adversity faced in local congregations.

Linda Booth 06:42

I'm going to tell you experience that was very disconcerting to me. So when women started being receiving calls in our congregation, there were about five or six, maybe seven women who received calls. And I remember being so excited as I began to hear about their calls. And because I had had that experience, I wondered about myself. And so the pastor of our congregation called me and asked me to have lunch with him, I thought, Oh, my goodness, maybe he's gonna call me to the priesthood. So we sat there during lunch. And instead of calling me to the priesthood, he said, Linda, I believe you've been running for priesthood. And as a result of that, I'm not calling you. And I just sat there. And I cried, and I said, I'm sorry, if there's been anything I've done to disturb you. That has never been my intent. And when I came home, I told my husband, Doug, and he was furious, and he said, You can't give a non-priesthood call. That's just not right.

Jennie Mathewson 08:02

She felt hurt and confused about what her role was within the church.

Linda Booth 08:08

And with time to take the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, I couldn't reach for the emblems because I felt so broken.

Jennie Mathewson 08:16

Other women like Becky Savage, had much less openly hostile encounters, but still noticed markedly different behavior from a few people just after her ordination.

Becky Savage 08:26

When I was first ordained in the in the congregation, the first congregation here in the Kansas City area, we had one gentleman who was very opposed to women in priesthood. First on my preached, he

got up and left. That's kind of like, okay. But most everyone else was supportive. I had a very supportive family. So you have a very supportive family and spouse who's extremely supportive, those things just outweigh many others.

Nevia Selmon 08:59

Next, we asked, what did it mean to you on a personal level to administer your first sacrament? Was it different from what you anticipated? Many women were uncertain and worried about how to perform their first sacraments. They started questioning the whole process and became overwhelmed by their opportunity to take part as an officiant. However, upon administering a sacrament, they felt a stronger spiritual connection with God.

Jane Gardner 09:29

So there were many sacraments to learn as a new priesthood member. I think communion was probably the first that I did and like I said, it was daunting because I would have thought I would know exactly how to do it and I didn't. It was just like, oh my gosh, how can this be?

Nevia Selmon 09:50

Gardner's experience with questioning her first sacrament, performing communion was similar to Carolyn Brock's for a sacrament of a baptism Carolyn Brock, unlike Jane Gardner, was serving as a priesthood member in Kenya.

Becky Savage 10:06

And I was going to be part of the three person team who was going to do that. So I remember being very worried that is, is this real? Do I have the ability to do this? How do I know I'm connecting with God or I don't even know these people's names. I don't speak their language.

Nevia Selmon 10:28

Brock's nerves led to her many questions on whether she was prepared to perform the sacrament. Booth dealt with her worries by writing out her sermon to prepare for her first time preaching after being ordained.

Linda Booth 10:42

Well, I had planned the service for four weeks. And for me to stand up for my first time as a newly ordained elder and preach was a little daunting to me. And I want it a lot of time. And I like to be prepared. And so I remember sitting down and writing out my sermon putting on three by five cards on Saturday, while the kids played, I stood in front of the mirror and I practice with the three by five cards. I went to church on Sunday morning, I put the cards in my pocket, I thought, and as I'm standing there before the service, which we typically do to have prayer before the service begins, I put my hand into my pocket feel the assurance of those cards, and I left the cards at home. And so I remember walking down to the pulpit and sitting there and literally trembling. Because this would be the first time I spoke and presided in this congregation and while they love me and supported me, I was very concerned

Nevia Selmon 11:05

Despite the support and love from her congregation. The honour of performing her first sacrament brought Linda booth much stress. Booth ended up forgetting her note cards at home. But she felt that God helped guide her through the entire sermon. After that she never used prepared cards while preaching again. Becky savage felt similar stressors when holding the plate during her first time serving communion.

Becky Savage 12:12

But I can remember the first time just serving communion. When you watch communion being served. It just looks so simple. But wouldn't you're the one holding the play. All different experience about Okay. Now, how close do you hold it? And do you help people how do you help people etc. So those that you know the first time you do things, trying to figure out your particular role as the minister providing the actual sacrament is is a different experience. And in very much a learning experience.

Nevia Selmon 12:51

Charmaine shares a similar experience in serving her First Communion to Becky when performing her first sacrament,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:59

It was something that I was doing for the sake of the body, and not for my own romanticized ideas of what it should feel like. So that was probably a really good beginning to think about what ministry is about because, you know, it's too easy for it to be about us. And you know, how we feel about ourselves and all of that.

Nevia Selmon 13:20

These ordained women were humbled in this position, and could feel God's power throughout the act of performing the sacraments. Jane Gardner remarks on some interesting experiences she had after being ordained. She and many other ordained women were able to baptize their daughters and nieces.

Jane Gardner 13:38

I got to some cool things after I was first ordained I was, I was able to baptize my daughter. So that was an interesting ability to be able to do something like that. I actually helped ordain my husband to another priesthood office.

Nevia Selmon 14:02

Carolyn Brock had a depth of spiritual experiences when performing her first sacraments and noted the energy she felt between God and those with whom she was ministering.

Becky Savage 14:14

I felt very much this kind of flow of energy down through an over me and up from the person and kind of like a layer of warm, life energy or something, I don't know how you would describe it, but it was very, I felt very deeply moved and almost to tears at times of just sensing that God knew each one of these people and they might be the anonymous poor to most people.

Madeleine Hickman 14:49

Well, the first of the sacraments administered by these women left lasting impressions. All of the women we spoke to for this project have had other memorable priesthood experiences since then, their position Isn't there local congregations allow them to have many meaningful interactions with those around them that they've been called to serve? For Gardner. Her ministry for her congregation involved much work as she was asked to juggle the duties of many roles.

Jane Gardner 15:12

So in the local congregation, I was doing things like, I was the worship leader or the and/or this song music leader. I was teaching children. I was preaching there Sunday, there were Sundays in our small congregation when I was actually sitting at the Oregon playing, and then I'd have to go up to the podium to preach and then go back to the organ and play.

Madeleine Hickman 15:42

Brock who administered in Kenya for a while during her early ministry found that certain sacraments she performed felt uniquely special.

Becky Savage 15:49

I think in the Africa years, any time that I engaged in teaching or leading or sacraments that involve touch in particular, there was always this very humbling sense of presence and blessing and also an awareness of people's potential.

Madeleine Hickman 16:20

Until 1994, the RLDS church practice closed communion, meaning only those baptized in their church could partake in communion. However, with a policy change in 1994, all Christians, regardless of church membership, could take communion. Savage told us about an experience involving a longtime attendee of her congregation after this policy change.

Becky Savage 16:42

We'd had a spouse of one of our members who had faithfully set through all of our Sunday services, including our communion and had the plate pass him by every first Sunday of the month, because he was not a member, although a Christian. And, the first Sunday, when I could offer him the plate of bread and wine was a very meaningful experience that just that ability to bring inclusion of a very faithful member of our congregation was so significant, and that's congregational ministry. And for he and his wife, his wife and him both and for all of the members of the congregation. It was made a special day for him because we could all bring him into the congregation as a whole. It's a very meaningful day.

Madeleine Hickman 17:38

The dutiful service offered by these women to their local congregations and family affected both the women administering the sacraments and those being administered to. Gardner reflecting on the time spent serving said,

Jane Gardner 17:51

it's not easy, but it it to me, it really is what the congregational ministry is all about is, is being available to the community, to offer sacrament to offer support.

Madeleine Hickman 18:08

The mixed reactions women often got when they began their work in the priesthood could be disheartening. But the experience of performing sacraments as members of the priesthood gave so many of them a distinct feeling that they were fulfilling their duty to God. Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue, who is currently the co-leader of the Diversity and Inclusion Team in Community of Christ, spoke about the sense of responsibility she felt during her first sacraments administered.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 18:31

It came with a deep sense of responsibility to represent God's love in that situation. I would think that would be an opportunity for all of us who are members. As a priesthood member, it had a deeper dimension to be all that I could be in that role as a servant. To know that, for some particular task involved, I was the representative for Christ is amazing, and tremendously, tremendously humbling.

Madeleine Hickman 19:26

This sense of responsibility and deep humility felt by Hawks-Blue was not unique. All the women interviewed for this project testified of the importance of their callings. Marge Troeh who served for a time as the Commissioner of Women's Ministry in the 1970s dedicated her focus to maximizing the ministry that could be done before women were ordained in 1985.

Marge Troeh 19:47

It was not about me, and trying to get me ordained, and so forth. It was about broadening the ministry that occurred in the church.

Madeleine Hickman 19:59

This theme of selfless service is echoed in Chvala-Smith's response when asked about what it meant to administer her first sacraments.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:06

I think just that whole idea that it reinforced the idea that this is about service, rather than about what my own feelings are. And that's been helpful in lots of ways just because I think we're a society that's, that's kind of addicted to feelings, and relating feelings to reality, and actually performing the sacraments. You're recognizing a different reality than just your feelings at the time.

Madeleine Hickman 20:40

Remember back to the instant Booth shared about her non call to the priesthood. Here is how she finished that story.

Linda Booth 20:46

I went home and I set sat on my bed and I was crying, and I was crying out to God. And all of a sudden, these words came to me and it was like, Do not allow your hurts and frustrations to separate you from

the people that you are called to serve. And those words remained in my mind because I I, I've pulled on them many times in my life depended upon them.

Madeleine Hickman 21:11

She shared with us what it means to her to hold the priesthood.

Linda Booth 21:16

Carrying priesthood is just not something cool to do, or an honor that you've been given. Priesthood is a gift and calling from God for the benefit of the people. And so, in order to focus on what the people need, you need to be connected to a divine power so that you can lead in such a way that there will be a benefit but also a transformation not only in the congregation, but in the lives of the people you serve.

Madeleine Hickman 21:52

Well, the first experiences of sacraments and priesthood calls for these women may not have been completely stress and pain free. They testified that the most important thing when it comes to ministering sacrament, is using God's power to strengthen and meet the needs of those around you. The next episode we will be expanding on the topic of women's experiences in ministry and Community of Christ to discuss experiences of denominational ministry, stories from the national and international levels of the church. That concludes our podcasts for today. Special thanks to Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue, Charmaine Chvala-Smith, Linda Booth, Marge Troeh, Jane Gardner, Carolyn Brock, and Becky Savage. Also, thanks to Dan Bennett, Travis Grandi and Yasmin Eisenhower of the Smith Learning Research and Technology team. Thanks to our professor David Howlett for making this possible. Thanks to Rachel Killebrew of Community of Christ library archives, and thanks to the Andrew Mellon Foundation that supports public facing student writing at Smith College.

Sophia Johnson 23:12

This is "Women's Rights," a podcast about women's ordination written and produced by students at Smith College. Hi, I'm Julia. I'm Sophia. And

Tessa Perry 23:27

I'm Tessa. We're your host for this episode of "Women's Rights."

Sophia Johnson 23:31

This season we are exploring the story of women's ordination in the Community of Christ a church with a quarter million members and formerly named the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This denomination began ordaining women in 1985. And on the 35th anniversary of these first ordinations, we're taking this season to look back on the journey towards women's ordination in the Community of Christ. To do so we've interviewed women ordained in the first decade after the 1985 policy change, women who went on to be leaders in the Community of Christ. Each episode in this series investigates a different topic, and today, we're going to look at denominational ministry. We will feature women reflecting on their ministry outside of the local conferences, retreats, international leadership gatherings and leadership of denominational bodies and hear their memorable stories.

Tessa Perry 24:23

We first asked our interviewees about the roles in which they have served the Community of Christ, the denominational level, Charmaine Chvala-Smith talked a bit about her role as an evangelist.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:33

And then I think it was 2010, I was ordained as an evangelist, which is a minister who brings blessing. And that comes in personal blessing. We have what's called an Evangelist Blessing, which is it has several parts to it, but the idea is that we offer prayer for a person and the different elements in their life, perhaps bringing some insight to them. The way I do it is I usually meet with a person once a month for at least a year. And we talk about their spiritual life. So I'm kind of acting as a spiritual director to them in that time, and we discuss their spiritual journey. And then at the end of that time, or sometimes it goes much longer than a year than I, we, I record a prayer, and I lay my hands on their head and offer a prayer of blessing. And that's recorded and then transcribed for them.

Linda Booth 25:37

Jane Gardner provided some insight on what holding the role of high priest signifies in the Community of Christ.

Jane Gardner 25:39

I was ordained a high priest. And the difference is that in the office of high priest, you're more looking at the world church, the global church, and starting to understand how we make a global community. And helping people understand that there's more to life than just inside their small congregation, that there's things outside of it.

Sophia Johnson 26:12

Jane spoke more about her experience serving in the denomination on a global level.

Jane Gardner 26:18

Since 2007, I've been on World Church Leadership Council. So that's about 25 people who are the decision makers, the policy holders, the policy creators for the whole world church. And so that's been a role I've had now since 2007. And I'm, I'm one of several women. So we've tried, as leaders, we've tried really hard to diversify. So there there are women on the council. There are also people from Africa, people from Honduras, people from Wales. What am I forgetting? Honduras, Africa, oh, from French Polynesia. There's a woman from French Polynesia. So it's pretty, it's getting more and more diverse. And it's an exciting time to be not just a woman, but to be helping in the leadership of the denomination.

Tessa Perry 27:24

We went on to ask our interviewees to share a memorable experience they had at a denominational conference retreat or other event, Charmaine spoke about the support system, she found among other ordain women at conferences.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:36

That was one of those things that especially from about 85 to 95, was really important, is that ordained women with would seek each other out at these kinds of things, at conferences, at Mission Center

conferences, or, you know, family camps. And so there was this, this kind of sense of, we can support each other. And among the women who were being ordained, there were some who were very traditional, as in, you know, their role, their thinking of the role is primarily in home and family. And so for some of them, this was a, this was a big stretch for them, and there was a real hesitance, but they felt that it was an honest call, and they had embraced it. And so there was lots of holding each other up.

Sophia Johnson 28:32

Linda Booth recounted a time when she organized the groundbreaking event of bonding with Restoration brands, congregations in Kansas City, who do not support women's ordination.

Linda Booth 28:43

Congregations in the Greater Kansas City area that remained and Community of Christ, but did not allow for women to be ordained in their congregations. And those pastors were attending to and so we sat there and talked, we prayed together, we talked, it was a great conversation. And the restoration elder looked at me said, Linda, you know, I like you. And I said, Well, I like you, too. He said, I said, Would you like to continue to meet? And he said, Yes, I think that would be good. So I started a group called the Restoration Reconciliation Committee. And once a month, we met and these were restoration men, elders, and we got up to be about 30 to 35 that met, and I heard the pain of these men who had been in some cases silenced in the church because of their hateful attitude toward women in the priesthood. And we began to become friends, we prayed together, and we decided to have a worship service because the Restorationists and Community of Christ couldn't worship together any longer because they didn't believe in women in ordination and, and the schism was so wide that even family members never worship together after that, so we thought, let's have a Restoration hymn festival. And we'll focus on Jesus Christ. That's what we have in common. And so we were there were only a couple places they would agree to have this service. And so we agreed to do it in the Auditorium, which is in Independence, which holds 6600 people. And on the night that we gathered for their Restoration hymn Festival, where men and women both participated in leading prayers and scripture. When I walked in, I was shocked. And that evening, they counted and there were almost 4000 people there. They had driven as far away as Michigan and all over the United States to come and worship together, because they had not had that experience. So I find it really astounding that a female apostle would have the experience of working with Restoration elders, to bring together people so that they could worship together for the first time. After a very long time.

Sophia Johnson 31:10

In 2007, Becky Savage was the first woman ordained in community of Christ's First Presidency, the highest leadership group in the church. She told us another emotional story about the moment she was recognized in that office, along with other women being ordained to be denominational leaders at that Community of Christ World Conference,

Becky Savage 31:30

They read this, this into the record. And he, so he reads this out to the First Presidency, or to the whole World Conference, which would, this is in that chamber that seats 6000 people. This is all the delegates that gathered from around the world church. And this was in March of 2007. We celebrate with all the Sisters of the church, another step in the long journey towards equal regard and opportunity in the

church and in society. While this is not the final step, it is a significant step. From this point forward, there should be no question or hesitancy regarding the appropriateness or capacity of women to serve in any leadership, or ministerial role in the church at any level of church organization. We will look forward to serving you to the best of our ability, as we fulfill the duties and functions of the First Presidency. But first, let us pause now and express appreciation and respect for all the women who looked forward to the day, and worked for this day, and sacrificed for this day before it ever seemed possible that a day such as this could happen.

Tessa Perry 32:57

Finally, our interviewees stress an experiences of backlash and exclusion they faced at conferences and retreats due to their gender. Becky here reflected on a particularly hurtful experience as a new member of the First Presidency, not long after ordination, a contrast to the joyful moment, you just heard.

Becky Savage 33:12

Members of the First Presidency of which there were three, President and two counselors. I'm one of the counselors to the president of the church that were considered the Presidency. So when there are assignments out, we try to share those assignments, and one of the kinds of assignments that we take, or when there's big celebrations of church, there was a congregation. I won't say where, that was celebrating a big significant, like 130th year of that congregation, and they generally would have a member of the First Presidency come for that celebration. President Veazey had been scheduled for that. He had a conflict. President Schall who was the second member of the Presidency was not available. And so they offered that I could come and I was free to come. And usually both for those kinds of assignments, you get a call from, if not the pastor, the Mission Center President saying, This is what we'd like you to do for that day. And we're happy to have you come. Well, it was getting like a week, 10 days before that event, and I've not heard anything. And so I called the Mission Center president and said, I haven't heard anything what's going on? And now all I got was "um, um...." And I Okay, is there an issue because I'm a female. And I got, "Yes."

Sophia Johnson 34:41

Becky also wasn't afraid to stand up for equal treatment of ordained women. She disclosed one particularly amusing moment of confrontation after receiving a demeaning remark.

Becky Savage 34:52

So, the first part of that conference, we have a receiving line as a First Presidency where people can come greet us One gentleman came through that line and his comment was, "I'm so glad we have for the first time a wife in the First Presidency." And, I said, "no we don't."

Sophia Johnson 35:16

Charmaine leaves us with an intriguing thought about why some people, particularly men have struggled to accept women's ordination in the Community of Christ.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:26

Times of not being accepted, to tend to be more awkward than they were hurtful. And, you know, that was, you know, I really think having been in the Michigan region as people were struggling with starting to accept ordination of women was really helpful, because I could mostly see that these were not mean people, you know, they were not people who, who wanted to harm but they were just struggling so hard with their own preconceptions of who God was and, and you know, maybe the maleness of God and, and, and maybe for some unrecognized assumptions that men were better than women or more, more religious or more spiritual. You know, they couldn't probably put words to that yet, but it was making some men especially feel like they weren't as special as they thought they were.

Tessa Perry 36:28

While there are differences in denominational roles and experiences ordained women have as we have highlighted, this episode will remain similar common experiences between these women is resilience in the face of gender discrimination, and finding support among others. In our next episode of "Women's Rights," we'll look at the topic of interfaith ministry and feature when reflecting on their interactions across denominational lines.

Sophia Johnson 36:57

That concludes our podcast for today. Special thanks to Charmaine Chvala-Smith, Jane Gardner, Linda Booth and Becky Savage. Also, thanks to Dan Bennett, Travis Grandi, and Yasmine Eisenhower, of the Smith Learning Research and Technology team. Thanks to Rachel Killebrew of Community of Christ library archives.

Tessa Perry 37:20

And thanks to the Andrew Mellon Foundation that supports public facing student writing at Smith College. See you next time on "Women's Rights."

Blake Smith 37:32

thanks for joining us here at Project Zion Podcast. You've been listening to repost of extra shot episodes originally recorded in 2020. If you'd like more information on those episodes, you can find it at projectzionpodcast.org. Go to the episode quick list and scroll down to extra shots episodes 70 through 73 and 75 through 77. Have a great day.