

# Extra Shot Repost | Women's Ordination in Community of Christ: Interfaith Ministry and Changes

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

women, denomination, ordination, ecumenical, Christ, priesthood, community, calling, God, relationship, ministry, service

## SPEAKERS

Becky Savage, Charmaine Chvala-Smith, Esther Kearns, Brittany Mangelson, Carolyn Brock, Linda Booth, David Howlett, Lily McGartland, Blake Smith, Annalie Gilbert, Marge Troeh, Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue, Jane Gardner, Clara Brill-Carlatt, Zoe House, Svetlana Roth

### **Blake Smith** 00:27

Hey Project Zion Podcast listeners. It's Blake Smith again. And in honor of the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women in Community of Christ, we're gonna once again reach back into the archives and revisit a couple of Extra Shot episodes on the topic of women in the priesthood. This particular episode is a combination of parts five and six of that six-part series, originally recorded by hosts Brittany Mangelson, and guest David Hallett. And it features podcasts that were a project for one of David Allen's classes at Smith College, and features his students who did all of the writing and editing and production for these episodes. Again, this is part five and six, and it originally aired in 2020. We hope you enjoy.

### **Brittany Mangelson** 01:18

Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This is Brittany Mangelson. So I have on David Howlett. David is a scholar and 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** 02:00

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 the 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, and 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 doing 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 I'm 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 donations 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 the 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 and women's ordination in Community of Christ. And that student, by the way, quoted a Brittany Mangelson in that essay, believe it or not.

**Brittany Mangelson** 04:33

I noticed that actually,

**David Howlett** 04:35

So there we go. That student did that research on her own. I didn't point her to that at all. So I mean, she found that like Googling and she's a really 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 yes

**Brittany Mangelson** 04:57

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.

**David Howlett** 05:12

Well, thank you for hosting us and giving us this opportunity.

**Annalie Gilbert** 05:21

This is "Women's Rights," a podcast about women's ordination, written and produced by students at Smith College.

**Lily McGartland** 05:35

Hi, I'm Lily.

**Annalie Gilbert 05:37**

I'm Annalie.

**Svetlana Roth 05:38**

And I'm Svetlana. We're your hosts for this episode of "Women's Rights." This season we are exploring the story of women's ordination in Community of Christ, a church with a quarter million members formally 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 important ordinations we're taking a look back on the journey towards women's ordination in Community of Christ. To do so, we've interviewed some of the first women ordained, women who went on to be leaders and Community of Christ.

**Lily McGartland 06:11**

Each episode in this series investigates a different topic and today in our sixth episode, we're going to look at issues of interfaith ministry, we asked these women to reflect back on their experience across denominational lines with other women, clergy, and with denominations that do not permit women to be ordained.

**Svetlana Roth 06:29**

We initially asked our interviewees how they have served in ecumenical interfaith spaces and how people reacted in those spaces to their ordination. Many religions in Christian denominations do not ordain women. However, despite these differences between Community of Christ and other faiths, a variety of ecumenical relationships, connections and interactions exist between them. We wondered what these interactions were like for the ordained women we interviewed, and whether or not they felt accepted and respected by those they connected with.

**Jane Gardner 06:57**

I serve often for the church in ecumenical ways. So for example, when 911 happened, the presidency of the church decided to open up our auditorium in Kansas City, to the community, and said to me, and one of the apostles, asked if we would work with the ministerial alliance to plan something while that space was open for people to come in, because people were really upset and searching for answers after 911. And so I helped lead that effort, and it was quite interesting. The Catholic Church, of course, was very present. And I have really good relationships with the liturgist and people involved in that community. And I really think it boils down to relationships because I had good relationships with them. They were not opposed to me being a minister, even though in their own church, women are not ordained.

**Svetlana Roth 08:10**

Jane Gardner is the first woman to serve as presiding evangelists and Community of Christ. Marge Troeh, one of the most important figures in the fight for women's ordination in the church also spoke about her interfaith interactions in the 70s and early 80s.

**Marge Troeh 08:25**

Well, I said I was on the National Board of Church Women United. I was on their ecumenical development team, and we were having a team meeting. I went up to the airport to pick them up, and they said, you know, we got to talking on the plane, and we realized we have never worshipped in a church of your faith. Would it be possible for us to come and worship at your church on Sunday? And so there was the one time when there was an intersection between women of my interfaith community and members of my Community of Christ community were there together.

**Svetlana Roth 09:10**

Charmaine Chvala-Smith, who was among the first women ordained by the church in 1985, and now serves as the Community of Christ seminary Chaplain described her experiences serving among members of other faiths.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:22**

So one of my probably earliest involvements in an ecumenical setting, once I was ordained, was in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, and in the hospital there, they didn't have a full-time chaplain. And so, the various denominations in the area had banded together and they had a training program so that basically they had the hospital covered all the time, with ministers from one denomination or another. And we had several in our congregation who were involved in that hospital chaplain program. And so that was one of the first opportunities I had as an ordained person to be involved in an ecumenical and community ministry. There was the ecumenical part as far as the fellow chaplains, but then there was also the ecumenical part, within the visits to patients. And of course, the main thing there was that we were not promoting our own denominations. We were present for the people and the need to pray with them or just be present with them.

**Lily McGartland 10:39**

And moving on to our second question, we asked Community of Christ ordained women if being ordained to change their perspective on other religions or denominations choices and opinions on women's ordination. In regard to the question, Jane Gardner responded...

**Jane Gardner 10:53**

When I look at other denominations, I think it's important to offer to share our experience. And I don't know, I continue to have really interesting insights. So I went to SDI which is Spiritual Directors International conference, and almost everybody there were women. There were almost no men. And, you know, spiritual direction is kind of grown up through the Catholic faith, the Catholic Church, but has become more and more ecumenical. Well, it was, so I was so interested in hearing the women, the Catholic women talk about being spiritual directors, and the more I got to thinking about it, in my own perspective, I could not understand how women in the Catholic church could justify is probably not the right word, but live with the fact that they could never be in the priesthood, they could never be ordained. But going to this conference, I'm listening to these Catholic women. And I realized that through this spiritual direction avenue, that they were expressing their calling their sense of, of ministry, and they were just doing it differently than I was. And even though their denomination doesn't allow

women to be ordained, they were still finding ways to offer ministry. So to me that was really has been eye opening, so that it isn't you have to be priesthood for any ministry to happen. That's not true.

**Lily McGartland 12:30**

Ordained in 1992, Becky Savage was the first woman to serve in the First Presidency in the church's history. She shared her perspective on women's ordination with us.

**Becky Savage 12:39**

I think, if anything, I'm probably more sensitive to those who have a yearning for their own ordination. So we've walk with other denomination women who are serving in ministry, and have their own obstacles and run across their own issues. And we can be collaborative with them because we we are women who walk side by side with men in an interfaith and ecumenical way. So there are very few denominations who have ordained women. And so when you walk side by side with other ordain women, you are colleagues and you find collaboration because you walk side by side in common with common issues. So in that sense, I think it's just more of a sensitivity and an empathy for other women, ordained women, and for those who do not have an opportunity to be ordained because of the denominations in which they have their faith.

**Lily McGartland 13:43**

And finally, Charmaine Chvala-Smith explained her feelings on other religious groups' opinions on women's ordination.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:50**

I would say that perhaps initially, I was quite understanding of why denominations struggle with ordaining women. And, but I think the longer that it has become normative n our denomination. The harder it is to imagine, not having ordained women allows you to treat women equally. It's been harder to imagine that not having ordained women means you can still treat women as a force. I've probably become less patient, less tolerant over time, with denominations that ... especially those who even refuse to begin the disk to begin a discussion, you know, wherever it might take them. For those who have already determined that God is male, or, you know, whatever is blocked, or that women are less than, or not as spiritual, are not as good prayers, or whatever it is they might use as their justification. I'm finding myself less and less able to respect that. And that's maybe not a good thing on my part. But because it's just become so, so ingrained in in our denomination to see that there doesn't need to be a distinction between men and women when it comes to bringing God's love to the world.

**Lily McGartland 15:33**

Each of these women in their own way, discuss the external and internal tension they face in their interactions with women, whether or taken or not of other denominations.

**Annalie Gilbert 15:43**

The third and final question we asked our interviewees was do you think that women's ordination has changed the relationship that Community of Christ has with the LDS church? What about other churches? Most of the answers we received focused primarily on the LDS church as opposed to other churches. And no two responses particularly echoed each other. Some responses such as Gwendolyn

Hawkes-Blue's, the first African American woman ordained by the church, emphasize the positive relationship between the two denominations.

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 16:16**

In very brief encounters, brief encounters I've had with some Mormon women at a at a John Whitmer Society event I went to, there was appreciation for the fact that women were being used in ministry in Community of Christ. So I think that was a, there was a positiveness about their relationship with the women who were priesthood members there. Overall, you know, it's simply another way for those individuals to to see God's work in a faith community. I can't speak for how it affected those, the individuals but I think positive.

**Annalie Gilbert 17:23**

Here, Gwendolyn implies a positive co-existence, or a level of respect, without a desire to change the other denominations structure between the two denominations. Although we only have one perspective, from this response, we can conclude that there is a great level of respect between the two denominations as they view each other's systems of ministry, prioritizing each denominations relationship with God over the priesthood positions anyone can hold. Another perspective, which was introduced by Charmaine Chvala-Smith, is the idea that Community of Christ has become a safe exit from the LDS church, for those who are bothered by the restrictions on priesthood.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:02**

For some LDS folks, our church has been, I think this is a healthy way to look at it, I'm not sure that others do that, that we're kind of a waystation there, that we're a place where they can come, they can recover, they can be reminded they are loved by God, there's a bigger world out there that can and wants to recognize them as Christians and their commitments as Christians. I think we've become realistic with the idea that we are not going to be the place where, we call them LDS seekers. So the Latter-day, the Mormon seekers. We may not be what some LDS seekers need permanently. But we can be a waystation, that gives them a safe exit point. And can help them start to adapt to a bigger Christian world. And sometimes we'll be able to help them move on to a denomination that will be a good fit for them, or maybe if they decide not to align with another denomination, at least to know that there are people who believe that this God is a loving God, and that they can still have a relationship with God. They may have to let go of some of the images of God that they have, but that the experience of God that they've had is not invalid, and that they can perhaps, let themselves be known as a loved person to themselves, as well as by God. And so we can we can give them that.

**Annalie Gilbert 19:45**

Charmaine's response implies a level of discord between the two churches that Gwendolyn did not allude to. While this quote speaks positively of the relationship between Community of Christ and those leaving the LDS church. It indicates the fundamental differences in priesthood structure as a point of contention between the LDS church and Community of Christ. Carolyn Brock, once active in formation of the church's ministries and now retired, also points to this discord and discussing her own view of the LDS church as Community of Christ moved towards women's ordination. And the LDS church maintained their patriarchal structure.

**Carolyn Brock** 20:22

If anything, it only strengthened my idea that they, that maybe the LDS church remained more and has remained more patriarchal. And that they took some of the things that we may be thought of as distortions that came out of the Nauvoo period, and kept those not all of those but many of those. And I, I see those as maybe distortions or patriarchal kinds of movements in their tradition. So I might even be more critical if you will, in my thinking towards them and I've...

**Annalie Gilbert** 21:06

Between these three responses, we can see that there is a wide range and women's views of the relationship between the LDS church and Community of Christ. Some view the relationship is respectful and distant, while others sense some tension between the two denominations.

21:21

In our next episode, "Changes," we'll look at how women's ordination has impacted these women's lives and how it has changed the denomination as a whole.

**Annalie Gilbert** 21:38

That concludes our podcast for today. Special thanks to Jane Gardner, Charmaine Chvala-Smith, Marge Troeh, Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue, Becky Savage, and Carolyn Brock. Also, thanks to Dan Bennett, Travis Grandi and Yasmin Eisenhower of the Smith Learning Research and Technology team. 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. See you next time on "Women's Rights."

**Clara Brill-Carlatt** 22:22

This is "Women's Rights," a podcast about women's ordination? Written and produced by students at Smith College.

**Zoe House** 22:36

Hi, we're Zoe House, Clara Brill-Carlatt, and Esther Kearns. We're your hosts for this episode of 'Women's Rites.' This season, we are exploring the story of women's ordination in 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 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. Each episode in this series investigates a different topic, and today, we're going to look at the theme of changes. How has ordination affected and changed the women who were ordained in the late '80s and early '90s? And how has women's ordination changed Community of Christ as a whole?"

**Esther Kearns** 23:31

We're going to start off by hearing from several ordained women about how their personal faith has changed since their ordination. Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue responded:



**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 23:40**

I don't know that my faith has changed. ... I think it's—well, if anything... the feeling that I might get is that God can use anyone. Laughs. You know, so I don't know if that's so much my faith changing as... at a more personal level, embracing that understanding. I mean, it's one thing to have it at a head level. And it's another to have it at... both an emotional and spiritual level.

**Zoe House 24:22**

Along with Gwendolyn, many of the women seemed to observe a difference between their faith “changing” completely versus their faith developing, growing, and maturing. Charmaine Chvala-Smith expressed this distinction well.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:38**

My own faith is just keeps changing. I mean, not in the most elemental ways, I think, at the foundation is still this absolute assurance that God is present and loving and calling us to be our best selves and offering to help us do that. So those pieces haven't changed. But, you know, I think it was trying to think of a specific. And I think, like in regard to prayer, that's a place where my faith has changed and is still changing.

**Esther Kearns 25:19**

Many of the ordained women talked about their faith journeys as them becoming more aware of and receptive to the Spirit. Gwendolyn observed this in her own life.

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 25:29**

One of the things that challenges me always and I hope in a sense that never goes away, is equipping myself as much as I can spiritually to be open again to God's Spirit to guide me in whatever it is I'm doing. And that's a work in progress.

**Clara Brill-Carlatt 26:07**

One's own faith is highly personal and intimate. So we are very grateful for being able to listen to these ordained women's insights into their ever-evolving spiritual journeys.

**Zoe House 26:17**

Next, let's find out what advice and support these ordained women would give based on their own experiences to other women who are newly called to the priesthood. Jane Gardner explains that deciding whether to accept a call to the priesthood requires careful thought, as well as patience.

**Jane Gardner 26:32**

My probably number one advice would be to not be in a hurry, to really give it a lot of prayer and thought, and see if it's a good fit, see if it makes sense in their life. And sometimes God calls us when it's uncomfortable. It makes us stretch.

**Zoe House 26:55**

Charmaine agrees that becoming ordained is a serious, humbling process. At the same time, she advises women to not let their ordination status define them completely.



**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 27:05

Don't let this determine all of who you are, it's part of who you are. And it's part of your relationship with God, but your relationship with God needs to be outside of that as well. So keep being open to just being deepened spiritually beyond that call. It's not the end all, there was a time in our church where being ordained was a bit of a, an end all. It proved that you had value. And, and don't, don't let it be that because it can hold you back.

**Zoe House** 27:43

A final piece of advice for women who are newly called or ordained is to find a spiritual mentor, Linda booth serves in this role and describes how she makes herself a resource for women who have been called.

**Linda Booth** 27:54

The first thing I do is share with them my testimony of their call, my assurance that God has divinely called them. And we talk about it, we talk about their fears, and we talk about their excitement, and all the different feelings that they might be experiencing. And then we end with a prayer where I pray a prayer blessing for each one. And then I continue to pray for them. And they know that I'm praying for them. And, I always allow myself to be open to a phone call or an email from someone who says, I have this experience and this is being asked to be what do you think I should do?

**Zoe House** 28:40

So now that we've heard the advice that women in the priesthood would like to give to newly ordained women, let's find out what work still needs to be done to make Community of Christ more equitable and inclusive.

28:51

The women interviewed for this podcast series felt that while great strides had been taken place, to make the Community of Christ more equitable and inclusive, more steps still needed to be taken. Gwendolyn talked about how a greater effort could have been taken by the Community of Christ to help newly ordained women, especially those with further marginalized identities to move into leadership roles, and

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 29:22

There were no particular efforts made to include me, but neither do I know how much they got together. So as I said, I have to lay the responsibility on both of us. Perhaps I could have said, hey, you know, I'm over here dealing with this. You got any ideas?

29:44

She suggested that the church should provide a clear structure to help newly ordained women move into their roles. Gwendolyn also hopes that the Community of Christ improves in the support of more marginalized identities.

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 30:02

If the idea of a woman of color being in the priesthood did not say to them, Hey, maybe she needs a little more help than some of the rest of us do. You know, I don't know what went or did not go through the heads. But I knew I was the only woman of color in the Mission Center.

30:24

Gwendolyn talked about the role of spiritual training, saying that ...

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 30:30

I think there's a lot of value in having that more formal training.

30:38

Jane feels that...

**Jane Gardner** 30:40

we have work to do to help women see themselves in these roles.

30:48

She talked about the importance of encouraging women to ask questions of...

**Jane Gardner** 30:55

What is it mean to offer yourself in service and ministry? And pragmatically, are you able to do it? And? And I think at the heart of it, do you feel the call? Do you feel like God's asking you to move in this direction?

31:15

Gwendolyn also reflected on hopeful signs demonstrated by an increase in diversity in high level church positions.

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 31:23

Now for many years, as a because you don't know previous conversation. When I would go to conference, especially when I was younger, you would look up on the rostrum of leadership, and you'd see white men, and that was it, period. That broadened to be some men of color. Very slowly. And then, within the last, gosh, 10-15 years, women appeared in leading ... apostles. And and as I said, this is the second, Stassi Cramm is now the second woman who has been a part of the First Presidency of the church. So the roles have been open. I mean, once it was open. And now I don't know if I would retrace from the very beginning of women's call in the late 80s to now I don't know how rapidly that occurred. But it has occurred. You know that women were seen in every role.

32:39

Gwendolyn also talked about the importance of increasing the inclusivity of members opinions. One way this is being done is that ...

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 32:49

Now at conference is when there are issues that are particularly sensitive or around which people can have pretty intense emotional reactions. There are efforts to work toward more consensus. And by that I mean not up down yes, no votes, but putting the question or concern there, and having the opportunity to have full support, limited support, no support, you know, varying degrees. And, that approach has been taken with regard to open communion. Or was taken rather, looking at questions about sexual orientation.

33:50

She felt that taking this type of approach would help the church become more inclusive for its members going forward. Charmaine talked about how second wave feminism and women's ordination in the 1980s began as a process of revealing blind spots in the church and wider culture. And this process needs to continue.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 34:18

I think the movement that that feminism started making happen in our church needs to spread to other blind spots that we have, you know, I say that any individual or any institution always has blind spots. We just don't know what they are yet. And they are often limiting the ministry we can bring or how or blinding us to how we see other people and that there's always a need to keep recognizing our blind spots. She

34:56

continued to reflect on what this means And for women in the church and American culture, but

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 35:05

I think as far as women are concerned, we are we're in a time in the, in this culture where we've been going backwards. We've been going backwards so quickly, as far as the rights of women. And right now, there's parts of culture that are threatening, threatening women, threatening children, threatening people of color, immigrants. And, you know, my hope is that things like the struggle of to ordain women in a denomination that was not prone towards that kind of change will give us eyes and a heart to be sensitive to what equality can look like and what it needs to look like.

35:59

Finally, Charmaine thought this search for equality has continued in the church's present day, inclusive policies on gender identity. However, she noted ...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 36:14

Unless we hang on to the recognition that it's not a fair world. It's a world in which those with power continue to make sure they have power. And that means there's somebody who's less than you. And that's, and if we don't question that, then then we've lost some of the momentum that where we've been.

**Esther Kearns** 36:44

As we've heard today, many changes have come out of the ordination of women in the Community of Christ, both on our church by level and on the individual level of the first waves of women, who were called to the priesthood in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although the work is not complete in the church, during the 35 years since women's ordination began, the Community of Christ has made significant strides towards inclusion and equity.

**Zoe House** 37:08

This has been our final episode in the series on women's ordination and Community of Christ. Thank you for tuning in to "Women's Rights."

**Clara Brill-Carlatt** 37:23

Special thanks to Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue Charmaine Chvala-Smith, Linda Booth and Jane Gardner. Also thanks to Dan Bennett, Travis Grandi and Yasmin Eisenhower of the Smith Learning Research and Technology team. 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. Tune in next time on "Women's Rights."

**Blake Smith** 37:53

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](http://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.