

What's Brewing | Citizen Diplomacy/Peace Builders

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Robin Linkhart, Chuck Montgomery

Robin Linkhart 00:28

Hello and welcome to What's Brewing, a Project Zion Podcast series where we explore the question, what is mission and why does it matter? I'm your host, Robin Linkhart, and I'm here today with Chuck Montgomery. Chuck is a lifelong resident of Des Moines, Iowa and retired attorney from Mid American Energy where he spent 36 years tapping his career with major wind energy projects. He is married to Doris. They have three children and five grandchildren. Chuck is a lifelong member of Community of Christ and attends the Northwest congregation in Northwest Des Moines. Welcome back to the podcast, Chuck. We are so delighted to have you.

Chuck Montgomery 01:16

Thanks, Robin. I appreciate you having me back.

Robin Linkhart 01:19

So I want to start with a quick question, just so our listeners can get to know you a little better. And this one's kind of out of left field. What was one of your favorite books as a young person, as a child or young teen, and why?

Chuck Montgomery 01:35

Born Free by Joy Adamson, and you may know the story. Well, great movie too. I think it won Academy Awards, but it's the great story of largely, her, Joy Adamson, and, to some extent, her husband, but there was an incident where baby cubs, lionesses were orphaned, Elsa being the prime one among them in terms of the focus of the book and Joy. And George Adamson took Elsa into their home, and for two years, raised her and loved her like a child. I mean, there was a very tight bond. And I think because they did truly love her, they knew that they needed to set her free, which wasn't an easy task, and they spent agonizing days taking her out. Often she wouldn't cooperate. She didn't really want to rejoin the wild, but they did it, and they left her. She was some distance from their home, miles and miles, but they went back periodically. And maybe the most touching part of the story is that Elsa would still come around and even bring her baby cubs to introduce them to Joy and George, which is a very touching scene in the movie. It went on and on, and there were subsequent books called Living Free and Forever Free, but it really opened the world to me in terms of animals and a love of animals and a recognition that they're far more than we give them credit for, and that science is beginning to recognize that. I think it's neat.

Robin Linkhart 03:21

That is amazing. As soon as you said the words Born Free, it just took me back in time, and I could hear the theme song of the movie. Great piece. Oh, really, I'm thinking I'm going to have to have my

granddaughter watch that with me for sure. Yes, wow. Okay, so your last interview with us was featured on Grounds for Peace series, and today we are under the What's Brewing banner, and that is because you and your mission center are taking what you and others have learned in association with citizen diplomacy and launching something new called Peace Builders. Now in my book, that is living out mission in the way of Jesus, the peaceful one. So, before you tell us all about Peace Builders, for our listeners who may not be familiar with citizen diplomacy, why don't you just give us the short version of citizen diplomats?

Chuck Montgomery 04:20

Yeah, citizen diplomats believe in the power of person to person, relationships across borders, across cultures, to change the course of history through collective acts of many persons, but sometimes through the act of a single person. And it brings to mind the story of Roswell Garst and Nikita Khrushchev, and the story of the American french fry brother that we covered in the first podcast. But all of these acts are more than just the initial act, because they send forth ripples of hope, and those ripples of hope inspire and encourage others to believe. Believe and act. And citizen diplomacy is the belief that, and that's the action that, based upon these premises, we all have a responsibility to contribute to international understanding. We've decided to call our effort Peace Builders. After some back and forth, citizen diplomacy sometimes creates confusion and suspicion. I've encountered it. Peace Builders won't, and I think Peace Builders are so harmonious with Community of Christ lexicon that it just fits better.

Robin Linkhart 05:35

Thanks for that briefing. And listeners, you can find a link to the full episode in our show notes. Now, obviously something has been hatching since we last spoke on Project Zion in the fall of 2023. So, what has been happening to bring you and others to this place of launching something new called Peace Builders?

Chuck Montgomery 05:59

We've had a number of things that are not Community of Christ related in the state of Iowa. Community of Christ, to some extent, has been involved in those, a number of them, actually, and that includes Janelle Anders, our mission center president. And I would just like to stop for a minute and say, I so appreciate her leadership and style of leadership. She is not one who seeks the limelight. She has a vision. She hires people to implement that vision, and she provides unending support and nurturing and at times a nudge. I've had two of those, and they're good. So, thank you for Janelle, what we've done, in addition to some of the statewide activities, which, frankly, aren't going as well as what we're doing in Community of Christ right now. It'll get there, but it's going to take a longer time, but we've been exploring options for programs that we could offer Community of Christ members. And when I say members, I don't mean baptized members. I mean people who are associated with our congregations and derive benefit from it. And this was Janelle's vision. Is she wanted us to have programs. And it's not just Peace Builders, it's other things too, that people can put into action their faith, because a lot of people want that and hunger for it. And so, we've selected programs. We've whittled down the number of things we considered based on affordability, having a variety of options. We selected initially, eight programs. Two of those have dropped out because of political events. In terms of funding from USA ID for programs we planned to take advantage of. We still don't know the ultimate outcome there. We're hopeful, but we don't know that would be the Farmer to Farmer program that we were very interested in and had farmers interested in, but also the Partners of the Americas program, which is 60 years old, goes back to the early 60s, that has some very interesting things that we were hoping to be a part of. We've drafted a strategic plan. We have approved it as of two weeks ago. We've had two big meetings of the steering committee. We have 16 members of that committee, and I'd like to just run through their names, Janine Ward, Max Pitt, Kay Herring, Doug Anthony, Liz Carpenter, Rita Jordan, Lisa Shehee-

Stobey, Bena Easter, Eric Elliot. Andre, forgive me, I will not pronounce this right. Andre Ivaninko, I promise I will get that right the next time. Erica McCroskey, Francis Cantrell, Dylan Pitt, Tyson Sires, Janelle Anders and myself. We've selected four programs to really move out on. We think they are things we're equipped to do now, and we're ready, but there'll be some preparatory work necessary. The first of those I'm really excited about, and I know some other people there are as well, is companion congregations. Some people have called it sister congregations. The aim there is to bring congregations in LHMC, our mission center, together with congregations either across national borders or across cultural borders. There's some discussion of perhaps going to South Texas to a location that the champion of this program, which is going to be Janine Ward, I'm very excited about, has connections. And there's discussion of going to Central America, possibly to Honduras. We haven't checked all the details out on this yet, but that's kind of the initial thinking and the basis upon which we've done some initial budgeting. I would like to see us go somewhere on the African continent. That's a possibility that we're still exploring, and we don't know what that fourth item would be. We're thinking probably strive here in this next several months for four matches, and we expect that the initial matching of these congregations will involve zoom meetings. We've talked to both Lutherans and Presbyterians who have similar programs, and it seems like one thing that really works is to bring together people from like disciplines, so that you might have a pastor to a pastor from the congregation, the women's leader to the women's leader, the youth leader to the youth leader, the choir director or music director to the music director as a start point. Hopefully there would be early on in the process, a worship service via zoom. Ultimately, the hope is that there will be the resources to make possible actual physical presence with each other. That's what we're hoping at this point. Another program is international visitors. Kay Herring is going to be the program champion for that. Kay is excited. She's had wonderful life experience in this area, largely with exchange students from other countries who've lived in her home. And she's going to expand that beyond just student exchanges to the State Department has a program called the International Visitors Leadership Program, and they've had this for decades, and it's been very, very successful. They bring leaders that have been identified by our embassies worldwide to this country, and they tour the country, usually on a given topic. There may be a group of journalists that do a lot of touring based on their journalistic profession, what have you. We're hopeful that we'll be able to team with local universities and colleges, hopefully, including Graceland. We've had an initial, very discrete, very encouraging conversation there with Diana Jones. So we're hoping that proceeds. The third the Yaxunah Cultural Center, Iowa has a sister state relationship with Yucatan Mexico. There is a small Mayan village by the name of Yaxunah, Y, a, x, u, n, a, h, we know my wife and I have been involved in the sister state relationship for years. We know the young man who dreamed this dream, 20-30, years ago, and he's made it a reality. It's been in existence now for 10 years. They provide lots of services to the youth in this village. They also provide a gathering point for lots of civic activities. It's a neat facility. They have a goal of bringing tourism to this area, because they lose too many of their people to big cities in the, in the in Mexico and some into the United States in order to get jobs. Tourism is a real possibility. Here they are, the site of a pretty historic, important pyramid. It's being slowly reconstructed. It's looking more and more like a pyramid. They have what was referred to as the white road, and they gathered white stones, and I'm not sure if it was limestone or what exactly, but it went on for miles and miles, and was the major road between two pyramids. What they don't have is housing that tourists, at least from developed countries would probably be very interested in staying in. We've stayed in it. It's not that bad, but they could really enhance their ability to attract tourists if we up it, upgraded a little bit. I've talked to Elias, who runs the cultural center, and dreamed the dream he would welcome a group, a team from our jurisdiction, to come down and help refurbish some of the homes that would host tourists. So, we're making some progress on that. I think that's going to happen. Hope to send us a team of six people down there yet this calendar year. And finally, group. Growing Hope Globally. Max Pitt, Professor Graceland has substantial experience with them. They're a faith-based group. They, they bring largely farmers and farm communities and churches and farm communities together and commit assets, whether it's acreage or livestock, to help fund tools and training in the developing world, in rural settings, in farm

settings, and some of Max's classes have participated in this and also taken trips. They don't always get to go to the place where they've helped fund things, but they go somewhere in the developing world and experience what life is like there. And another key feature is that it's got subsidized traveling, particularly for people that are 40 years and younger, up to 75% of the cost. Max has agreed to be the champion for that program, and I'm thrilled with that. I skipped Doug Anthony, who is going to be the champion for the Yaxunah Cultural Center program. We have some other things that we're going to do. We're going to promote sister cities, sister state relationships. There's a lot of them in Iowa that'll largely be kind of a clearinghouse function for us. We're going to use our website better to advertise those and help facilitate connections between members, or maybe even congregations that want to be a part of one of those organizations. And then we're going to stand up an educational component on the website about citizen diplomacy or Peace Builders. So, those are the programs we literally have just adopted those week before last. Finally, we took two meetings to go through all that. Had lively debate, good discussion. I'm really impressed with the steering committee. They are amazing. We've got program champions assigned and excited about their mission. So, I think we're really going to make a push here in April, May and June, to get us with appropriate foundation to do an active launch in months afterwards. And I'm very hopeful that we can get people engaged, yet this calendar year, because I think a key to the success of this in the long run and its growth is providing opportunities for the development of testimonies that can be shared. I mean, that's the way the church grows. That's the way the church in Jerusalem grew, the way the church in Rome grew. It's a pattern that we should follow, and we're going to be gearing up our ability to get that shared. You know, whether it's through our website or people going out into the congregations around the Mission Center to share the story or speaking at camps. So, that's kind of bringing you up to date where we're at right now. Got a lot of work to do.

Robin Linkhart 18:15

Yeah, that's really exciting. I mean, obviously you all have done a lot of in-depth work and research and golly, it's, it's a lot, and I, I probably have a million questions, but I'll just kind of focus on a few here. Yeah. So, so far, I mean, you've really taken a journey together, and a lot of people are connected with you now so far, what would you say the high points have been on that journey, and what have been the challenges?

Chuck Montgomery 18:47

The high points for me have been the excited people that come up to me with tears in their eyes, sometimes with eyes ablaze, sometimes, sometimes both, and there's a pastor. You were actually at this conference. It was our Mission Center conference down in Lamoni. After that opportunity to speak a little bit about Peace Builders, a pastor of one of our small congregations came up, and she was just alive, and I am determined not to disappoint her. She's been kind of a spirit guide for me ever since she sees this as a real possibility for her congregation and revival of her congregation. And again, when she says, I want this, and she's been working toward that end to get it accomplished, we're going to do our best to make sure that she gets matched, because I think the companion congregation is what she's really most interested in. We have a retired factory manager who is living the good life of retirement and when he heard about the Yaxunah Cultural Center Project, he said, I want to go to work, and I think we're going to get him down to Yaxunah to help get that done. We have a young trauma therapist who hears a call to share her gift in places where they probably don't even know what trauma related services are. She's got a little time delay. She's really booked up in the next year, but she's determined, and from what I know of her, it will happen. I want to get her placed somewhere that she can give that gift. I had a cancer survivor come up to me, actually, was at that same conference, and say, please use me. I have medical abilities. My husband does. We want to get engaged in this. Two very well connected farmers have not only come up and expressed a desire to be a part of it, they've actually done things. Lisa Stobe and Liz Carpenter down on the Lamoni area. They brought us down to speak to a collection of three congregations with a lot of farmers in them. Lisa brought us to northern Missouri

actually, to her, I think it's called grassroots committee or organization. It was a gathering one evening of like 30 farmers and family. And I have a good friend, Roger Engstrom, who's not a member of the church, but has devoted 30 years of his life to Farmer to Farmer. Exchanges go down and he spoke their language. They surrounded him when he was done so and then just what I've said already is the steering committee, the six, the 15 people that have agreed to join me in this effort, and the excitement they show in the meetings. I mean, it's, it's impressive. That's been the highlight for me. I guess you asked for challenges too, didn't you? [Yeah]. I mean, the biggest challenge thus far is kind of what I alluded to. It's the president's decision, decision to largely defund the US Agency for International Development, the Farmer to Farmer program is hugely successful. It's not clear yet what's going to happen there. Doesn't look good at the moment. I'm very hopeful that something will be preserved there, because there are people. I had two people before we even got this launched, really, and Liz Carpenter was one of them, and the other was, his name is Chur, from the adjacent Mission Center. It's not the Mission Center president, it's his cousin, Joel. I think maybe he was very interested. And there was a poultry project in Ethiopia that was open, and he runs a huge poultry operation. He would have been perfect for it, but it was just a bad time. And Liz was very interested in it, and probably would have gone, but they didn't feel she had enough experience yet in that area, but she's continuing to monitor. And if the program survives, I know there are others that will go and do this, and the testimonies that they will come back with will be amazing. That's the main challenge. I think, you know, the other would just be, we've got some fundraising ahead of us, and that will be a challenge. That's always a challenge, but I think it's manageable.

Robin Linkhart 23:48

So you've already told us several really exciting stories of the response that you've received when you share about this with others, as you're out and about in in other areas of your life, even maybe you share with people who aren't members of the Church, what kind of responses do you get?

Chuck Montgomery 24:10

I was at lunch last Thursday, I think, with a guy I worked with for years at Mid American energy, and we had just gotten reconnected, and we usually connected over things International. He's a big proponent of going places, but always with a volunteer component, and he did that in Rwanda, for instance, not only took used laptops from Mid American and provided them and had to fight to get that done, but also participated in construction of facilities when he was there, because he's very talented, he started talking about, he's going to go to Ghana in October. My wife is actually going too, but she's not going on this motorcycle ride Dale Ward, maybe, though. He's thinking about it from the church, but Bob Metcalfe is his name, and he is going to do it along with his wife, and it's a fundraiser. It's kind of a funky idea. They're going to ride motorcycles, and they've obtained pledges to raise money for Self Help International, the nonprofit that does a lot of work in Ghana. And anyway, we he, as he usually does, has worked out that he's going to stay longer and do some construction work there too. And also he's a IT expert. He's going to instruct them in better use of, I forget what the app is, but it's an app that the organization needs anyway. Things start calculating in my head, and I say, wait a minute, this guy could be a part of our Yaxunah Cultural Center program. I mean, he's a craftsman, and he's thinking about it. He's interested in it. So I'm hopeful. So, it's not just church people. There have been non-church people that are very interested. My secret desire is that somehow we'll get connected with the Mennonites. You probably know from last time that I love those folks and what they do and why they do it, and there we are actually going to have a joint worship service with them, the congregation in the neighborhood of Northwest congregation, and we're hoping that'll build out into projects in the community, the schools in particular that we have in common in this neighborhood.

Robin Linkhart 26:37

Wow, that's amazing. I love the way partnerships can emerge from relationships and connections we have in our everyday life and so exciting.

Chuck Montgomery 26:49

And that's what's been so moving about this work, is it just things keep being put in front of us, and it's like, Where's that coming from?

Robin Linkhart 27:01

Yeah, yeah, right. Okay, so people are going to be hearing about what's happening in the Lamoni Heartland, and when you think about that, Chuck, how might an effort like this reflecting the principles of citizen diplomacy, citizen diplomats be replicated in other parts of the church.

Chuck Montgomery 27:29

I think it can absolutely be done easily. I think the key is identifying a menu of options or programs that appeal to your group and fit the skills that your group has. They're certainly welcome to build off what we have. We'll be glad to share any and everything, and also to offer any help that they might want, and hopefully, down the road, work together. I think the key early on is developing a steering committee, going to work on program selection, which requires a fair amount of spade work in meeting with organizations that can help you. We're going to lean heavily on some long term organizations. Yeah, that's it's easily done. I, we should do it.

Robin Linkhart 28:24

Yeah, it's exciting. So you're, you're at the beginning of this adventure, and obviously this has been the combination of many years of learning about citizen diplomacy and experiencing that. And the stories that you told in your interview before were just oh my gosh. They were just amazing. But at the beginning of Peace Builders, when you look to the next few years, where do you see Peace Builders a year from now and maybe even five years from now? But what are your hopes around that?

Chuck Montgomery 28:58

Well, next year, I hope you'll invite Peace Builders back, but next time, it'll be the program champions talking, and they'll share the testimonies that they've experienced and that those working with them have experienced, and maybe even, you know, some of the people from the different projects, both overseas and here on the podcast too, sharing the story five years maybe less. What I've thought about is exactly what you were just suggesting is hopefully we'll have on a podcast people from different mission centers talking about their programs and how we're working cooperatively and collectively to really expand this. I mean, it could make the difference in hundreds of 1000s of people's lives if we let it. And I know this isn't the only thing. There's lots of other stuff too that needs to be done, but I think this has its place.

Robin Linkhart 29:58

Yeah, absolutely, I agree with you 100% and this next question kind of goes along with advocating inviting others to join us. If Peace Builders was going to have a theme hymn from Community of Christ sings hymnal, which one would it be and why?

Chuck Montgomery 30:19

I struggled with this one, but I came up with take the pass of "Take the Path of the Disciple," which we actually sang yesterday in our service. I love the way it talks about the journey, the path, the struggle. It's not easy. And I love the melody. I mean, to me, it just matches the journey, the ups and downs.

Robin Linkhart 30:46

Wow. That's a great one. I wondered what you might come up with that is a perfect one. "Take the Path of the Disciple." I love it. I love it.

Chuck Montgomery 30:54

We've got so many good ones. It's hard to choose.

Robin Linkhart 30:56

Isn't it, though? It is. So, one of Community of Christ's most beloved practices, traditions, you might say, is our camping tradition. And we we pack up ourselves, our family, our friends, or both. We head off into nature to camp together for four to seven days to attend what we call a reunion or a family camp, and it's quite the big event. It's usually in the summer, depending on where you are on the globe, and it's often at a regional campgrounds that's owned by the church. And we can have, you know, 50 to as many as 300 or more people of all ages. And one of the things that we do is, at the end of the day, after supper, and it's usually dark, we gather around a campfire and we sing songs and share stories and listen to the fire crackle in the dark, and we, I mean, we just stare intently into the flames of that fire. And at the end of the service, there's usually a quiet, and all you can hear is the crackle of the fire. And so, very often, my experience has been, and I hear other people share this too, is that there's a sense of the Holy Spirit's presence in ways that just warm the essence of the human soul. It's almost like somehow fire can speak God language in the circle of everyday human beings, learning how to live and love. So how has this recent journey caused the fire inside you and others to kindle anew.

Chuck Montgomery 32:46

I think you know, pretty much the kindling in others that I've seen, I've shared, and it's obvious. I mean, it's not only in the glow, in the tears, in the look and the words said, but it's in what they've done subsequent to that, because many of those people are on our steering committee and are stepping up. Personally, I believed in the rightness of citizen diplomacy or peace building. For a long time, I've experienced the love and the respect it creates that replaces suspicion and anger and judgment about the other. Literally, I've seen that in places where the two groups were almost on a razor's edge because of fraught relations between the countries. And I knew that the Community of Christ is gifted in the things that are required, the skills to be good, Peace Builders, citizen diplomats. They love sacrificially, they can act audaciously when required, and they have resilience in the face of adversity. What I'd not seen is how directly it ties into the Community of Christ prophetic vision of mission. My friend Max Pitt, I give some credit for helping me connect that. Finally, we were working on a service that touched upon citizen diplomacy, and he directed my attention to Section 164 that created a fire. I had never really paid attention to it. It took me to 163 that did it all over again. I have to say, I've been deeply moved to read what appears to me to be a very clear roadmap for us to usher in the rise of Zion the beautiful. It says, I think the sections are a clarion call to walk a certain path with those who are impoverished and suffering, including the living Earth, and to pursue peace in very specific ways that seem to me to include peace building like we're envisioning it, and to walk a path that arrives in communities of generosity, justice and peacefulness, as the words of those sections refer and we have the promise that, if we'll just overcome our fears, our insecurities and our competing loyalties, the rise of Zion the beautiful, is awaiting us, but it requires a generous, wholehearted response. I think President Veazey has delivered a treasure to us. He's kept faith with his prophetic forebears. I don't think the wholehearted response called for is for God's enjoyment or ego. I think it's because He created us for life of a certain kind, and it's only possible if we've experienced the experiences and the growth that peace building and healing and justice for those suffering. If we do those things, we'll have the experiences that will cause the growth within us that will allow us to enter that kingdom. And it's actually our benefit that God calls us to, to this challenging path he's been trying to tell us for ages. You mentioned reunion grounds. I was at Guthrie Grove a few weeks back. I'm taking the SALT courses. Your friend Linda Stanbridge, and she gave you credit for her being there, was present and taught

about the Hebrew Bible. Blah. Blah. I was not looking forward to it. She set me on fire. I mean, it was incredible. She knows her stuff. And the key thing I took away was how Old Testament prophets have been saying the same thing Steve Veazey is saying today, two and a half thousand years ago, you know or longer, we don't know. And it reminded me of Jesus's ministry. We call him the peaceful one for many reasons, including his approach to people that his culture considered the other: Romans, Samaritans, prostitutes, an Israelite who collected Roman taxes and so on. He befriended them. He audaciously made one to one contact with them that awakened something in them, a bond that caused these doubters to believe in something new, and he built peace with them and created community they hadn't known existed. And his disciples, per his orders, forged, forged into the Roman world, even Rome, and made the same thing happen there, through the power of the Spirit. I mean, they know a much better life because they did that. And it appears to me that the Hebrew prophets were calling the ancient Israelites to the same thing we're being called to today, and that Jesus demonstrated by his own life we should be doing today. And again, President Veazey has delivered the guidance of the Spirit to us, saying we need to walk those same paths. God's been telling us that for nearly 3000 years, we gotta do it. And I appreciate this, because it connected for me, finally, our vision of the future in our ministry with what I recognize was a good thing, but wasn't sure how it fit in.

Robin Linkhart 39:07

I love that. I love that. And Linda Stanbridge is just some kind of fire, isn't she? That's wonderful. So Chuck, what would you, what would you like to share that you haven't already shared with us today, that I haven't asked you about.

Chuck Montgomery 39:27

I think you've covered it well.

Robin Linkhart 39:28

Well, we sure appreciate you taking time off to be with us today and share not only your journey, but the stories that intersect that journey and being able to share a little bit with you through the window that you offer, to hear those stories and to feel that fire, man alive, it's a kindle, isn't it? It is, and I'm sure that we will get a lot of interest about Peace Builders as people hear your story, so thank you so much.

Chuck Montgomery 40:05

Thank you for your leadership and for the way you nurture people. I mean, it's really, it's a blessing to be subject to it. I mean, I have really benefited from it. I hope this mission really benefits from it, and I think it will.

Robin Linkhart 40:23

Thank you, listeners. If you want to know more about this topic, you can find links about the things we've talked about today in the show notes for this episode. As always, a very special thanks to all of you, our listeners, for spending a portion of your day with us. 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.