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Carla Long 00:27

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long and today, you're going to be learning about something that you may know a lot about. Or you may be like me and don't know a lot about it, actually. Today, we're going to talk to Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue. And she is a member of the Standing High Council in Community of Christ. And if you have never even heard of the Standing High Council, then today's your lucky day, because you're going to hear a lot more about it. So, hi, Gwen. Thank you so much for being here.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 01:01

Hi, Carla, I'm really pleased to have this opportunity to chat with you.

Carla Long 01:05

Oh, that's good, because I didn't know if you'd be pleased about it or not. So, before we jump into the Standing High Council and what it does and who they are, um, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, Gwen?

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 01:18

Sure. Well, uh, I grew up in the state of Florida, in Pensacola, and only gravitated to the Midwest, uh, Missouri, where I live now, after attending college in both Iowa, Graceland, and then KU in Lawrence, Kansas. So, I actually joined the church when I was about nine years old. So, I'm familiar with it from having lived as a part of this faith body for a number of years. So, um, as I mentioned, I went to Graceland for a couple of years, transferred to KU, worked in the field of social services type positions for cities, state, quasi-government for about 20 some years and then worked as a speaker slash trainer for SkillPath Seminars for about 15 years. (Oh, wow.) I was married, had three children. And I have two wonderful grandkids.

Carla Long 02:17

Oh, I hear that having grandkids is the best part of having kids. (Oh, it is. It is. I assure you.) Um, yes, I, I can understand that. Uh, I did not realize that you are a Jayhawk, a little Jayhawker. I also am from Kansas, and, so, my dad went to K State. So, (Oh, well.) we might have to finish this podcast a little early because I'm not sure I'm supposed to be talking to anyone from KU, just saying.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 02:43

I hear you. Well, one of my, my sons went to MU, so, you know, that's the way it goes.

Carla Long 02:48

Ooo, that's, that's tough. That's tough. So, Gwen, I think I'm just gonna' start off with, like, just a pretty easy question. And what is the Standing High Council?

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 02:59

The Standing High Council is a body of 12 High Priests in the church who serve at the pleasure of the First Presidency, uh, to provide advice as an advisory council. And, and I, I think maybe looking at the title itself may help some understanding basic, the choice of wording to name this body, um, allows it to kind of differentiate itself from other councils in the church. The term standing means that this is a permanent Council. It's not ad hoc or temporary. And then the term High Council conveys that the group is composed of High Priests exclusively and it has the authority and takes precedence over other councils of lesser authority within its jurisdiction. So, that's kind of the title and what all that implies.

Carla Long 03:52

Well, you've already, I, I, you've already surprised me. I didn't realize that you had to be a High Priest in order to be on the Standing High Council. So, that, I've already, I've already learned something from this podcast and we're, what, three minutes in. Um, so, that's really interesting, the Standing High Council and they, um, they, they serve at the pleasure of the President of the church.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 04:14

Right. Yeah, the Council members are actually called by the First Presidency of the church. There's no election or nomination or anything like that. And, you know, I don't know verbatim what the criteria is for the call, but there are people from a variety of backgrounds, which is very helpful, and I think that truly makes a difference.

Carla Long 04:36

For sure. And I think you said that there are 12 people on the Council.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 04:42

Yes, there are 12. And, in fact, there have been changes since I came on the council in the, uh, 90s in that there are people from outside of the United States. Currently, of the 12 members, there are four states within, uh, the United States represented--Ohio, Florida, Michigan and Missouri. But then the other members are from other countries. There are eight members from the USA. And then the other, uh, members are from different countries, South Australia, uh, Canada, Nigeria, and Germany.

Carla Long 05:23

That makes me really happy to hear because, you know, to be a worldwide church, we really need worldwide voices. And, so, I, that, and I know, I knew one was from Germany because I remember when she was, uh, set apart last conference, (Right.) yes. And she is a very dear friend of mine.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 05:41

Yeah, I agree with you. That question came up some years ago, when I was doing some kind of presentation, uh, the question came up about membership and were there members outside of the

USA. And, so, it is very meaningful, I think, for the church to have that broad spectrum of perspectives from folks from different nations or countries with their particular culture.

Carla Long 06:05

Absolutely. Very, very important. And I love hearing about that. So, you said that you're chosen by the President? And, so, like, does, well, right now, the President/Prophet is Steve Veazey. And, of course, and I, does he just call you up and say, Hey, I was wondering if you'd be a part of it? Is that how you're chosen? Is that how it works?

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 06:23

Well, actually, it was something like that. But it was when, uh, Grant McMurray was president of the church. And I did get a telephone call. And, uh, I remember it vividly. Uh, he called and asked if I would be willing to serve on the, uh, Standing High Council. And my first question showed where I was as far as knowledge, which is where I think a lot of people are, if you don't delve into it. What exactly does that group do, I asked. And his response was that they served, other groups did serve to provide a variety of perspectives on different topics identified by the First Presidency, from that individual's particular experience. And, uh, we would meet periodically. And if I would be willing to volunteer to participate, then that opportunity was available. So, I said yes. And, and I have to tell you, as a personal testimony, um, that, being a part of that group was never, you know, kind of on my radar screen, as they say, a young black woman growing up in the South, and I knew about the council, having heard about it over the years, but to, to have been asked, said to me, um, that being available to serve the church in some capacity was a significant opportunity. And I wanted to embrace that. I have to tell you, I, I like the scripture where Mordecai talks to Queen Esther when his nation was in danger, and she was a little hesitant or questioning why she should take on the responsibility he asked. And he said, Well, you don't know that, but perhaps you are here for such a time as this. And I really thought about that in, in my thinking in response to the question of whether I wanted to serve that, perhaps because of my life's experience, it would be helpful if I were to participate because my voice was needed. And not to make any special thing about my voice except in the sense that I had experience that perhaps could be useful.

Carla Long 08:49

Absolutely. Absolutely. I'm, I'm so glad that it's your voice that is counseling the President/Prophet of the church and, and many others. But (Oh, yes, yes.) Gwen knowing you I, I completely trust what you have to say. And I'm sure I'd be behind you. How often do you meet? Do you meet often like

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 09:09

Well, you have to say pre-COVID and post COVID. (Right.) Pre-COVID we met, uh, at least quarterly. I was trying to remember how often did we meet? It's been so, so many years now. But we would meet at least quarterly. And, uh, actually, the last time we gathered was for a retreat because typically when we meet, it's, um, a meeting of two, maybe three hours, and we're dealing with very significant challenging issues and that period to come together and talk is, is, is pretty limited. So, we had the retreat in order to allow an opportunity for us to get to know each other a little better, but also to spend more time in discussion. So, that was back in 19, 2019 maybe or 2020. I don't know. COVID is, has messed up my thinking as far as when things take place, but I know it was pre-COVID. Since then,

however, since COVID, we have not been able to meet. But there is an upcoming discussion that's planned, working around different time zones. So, we'll be meeting, uh, in two sessions and the sessions are set up so that they are appropriate for people in different time zones.

Carla Long 10:29

Yeah, that's never easy. Have you, it's never ever easy figuring that out, especially when you have someone from Australia and Africa (And Nigeria.) That, that makes it a little difficult.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 10:39

Yes, it does.

Carla Long 10:40

So, do members of the Standing High Council change every single conference? Like, is there, like, a, a, a term? Or are you just on and you decide when to get off of it? How does that work?

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 10:51

It's more, a part of it is, is the second, uh, idea you suggested there. People are asked to be on the Council and an individual may decide, I would like to let go of this responsibility, or, I appreciate the opportunity and resign from the Council. Or you may receive a letter thanking you for your service. So, those are the two ways that I'm aware of. Uh, and there is no, there has been discussion of whether there should be time limits or, or cycles, but currently, it's either a person resigns or they are thanked for their service.

Carla Long 11:34

That sounds right. That sounds pretty good. And you've been on the council for a long time? If (. . .) (A very long time. Yes, yes.) That's awesome. I love hearing that.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 11:45

I appreciate the opportunity to serve. To be very candid, I would be hesitant to resign at this point simply because there are no other people of color from the United States. You know? I mean, that is certainly not the only factor, but for me, that is a factor. Uh, I certainly can serve the church in many, many different ways as many of your listeners and you do. But that is, uh, one of the factors for me.

Carla Long 12:18

Well, I'm grateful for your service, Gwen. I'm very grateful for you. So, let's just get into the nitty gritty of it. What does the Standing High Council actually do? You know, you say that you advise the president, but what do you talk about? What do you discuss? Like, can you just give me some of the those little details?

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 12:35

Sure I can. And, and as I do that, I'd like to first insert a little history so you have some notion of how the Council has evolved. I didn't realize till a number of years ago that there used to be two councils. There was a Standing High Council in Kirtland and one in Independence. And the first establishment or the establishment of the Standing High Council took place on February 17, 1834, in Kirtland, and I'll

read a quote from Doctrine and Covenants that said, "This day a general council of 24 high priests assembled at the house of Joseph Smith by revelation and proceeded to organize the High Council of the Church of Christ which was to consist of 12 high priests and one or three presidents as the case might require for the purpose of settling important difficulties which might arise in the church or the bishop's council to the satisfaction of the parties." Well, in 2012, President Veazey was talking about the historical, um, Council and mentioned the fact that there were two, but as membership began to grow in Independence, the one in Kirtland was closed and the one in Independence continued. And he said that the nature and function of the Council also evolved. Initially, the Council focused on things like sending out missionaries, it managed the migration of members, it ruled on church court cases and other such duties. So, then, as the church grew, in fact, and the structure of the Church changed so that there were field people, there were appointees, there was the, uh, establishment of the Apostles, field administration changed, so, that brought about a change in the function of the Standing High Council. But in recent history, the judicial function was used when necessary because, initially, a lot of judicial things came to the Council, and the primary activity of the standing high council was to provide guidance on moral, ethical, theological and sacramental issues. Those are the primary foci of the Council at this point. What he also said, too, which speaks to the membership, he said, "The church is blessed to have a Council which includes seasoned ministers from different generations who are organizational leaders, professional counselors, psychologists, theologians, and theologians with a background in ethics, judges and medical professionals. My personal background is in counseling. So, you have that broad perspectum of experiences in life and, and understandings. So, what happens now often is that the Council is assigned to work in committees and then provide feedback on situations and/or issues. Uh, we study topics of concern to the church. We provide reports and, when needed, draft statements or position statements for review by the First Presidency. And there are occasions where members have rendered papers based on that particular person's area of expertise on specific topics of interest to the First Presidency. And a question I'll roll this into that has come up before, Does the Council suggest topics? And while I believe the First Presidency may be open to hear from us, the agenda is set by the First Presidency for the Council. So, to give you some idea of reports and papers and statements in the last 20 years have covered things like preventing ministerial misconduct, policy on privileged communications to a minister, Race and Ethnicity Task Force report, uh, revision of the statement on abortion happened, taking stands on restoring justice. There was a committee on homosexuality in the church. Uh, we reviewed the succession in presidency, there was presentational process, dialogue with purpose and integrity, there was a paper theological foundation for sexual ethics, and there's also have been papers on reflections on the future Standing High Council membership. So, as you see, there's a broad area that is covered. And I think essential to our work is what is happening in the church. Questions are coming up by the membership, what challenges are people dealing with. And I, I only have some inkling of the fact that the First Presidency gets lots of communication from church members. But I'm sure that some of what we discuss has come about because people are very concerned about a topic or an issue. And, so, then when we meet we'll have an agenda that identifies this is what we plan to discuss or have that information prior to the meeting so we can do our homework and come with ideas and thoughts and suggestions to share.

Carla Long 18:08

Wow. It does seem like you're dealing with some of the harder issues of the church (Yes.) and harder issues of life. And I'm sure that many of you come from very different perspectives. (Yes, yes.) So, do

you as a group, come to some sort of consensus of what advice you're going to give to the First Presidency? Or if there's a lot of different ideas out there, do you present all of that to the First Presidency? How does that part work?

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 18:41

It pretty much works that each person will present, or committee if there's been a group committee assigned to something, present their take on it. Diversity of experiences or perspectives, provides broader understandings. So, it's not a lockstep we all agree that this, although there may be people of the 12 who have similar takes on it or similar, uh, thinking about an issue, but that diversity and who we are, helps and, and our perspectives helps to give a broader look by the First Presidency so that they can weigh ideas and look at things from a, a wider lens than just one notion. So, uh, the quick answer to your question is yes, we bring variety. No, there's not always consensus about our thoughts. But after having heard us, the First Presidency, and, and the, obviously, the First Presidency has other bodies that they share some, probably some of the same types of things that we address. So, they're getting feedback, you know, but it's, say if, if they're talking to the Council of Twelve, the Council of Twelve members will have a take on it from their position, you know. In council meetings, one might say, here's what I'm hearing in the jurisdiction where I live, or here are the questions that come up for me, or here are the questions that people pose to me, you know, so there may be a variety of ways that an individual who's a member would say, I've come to the table with this idea, this thought or this question.

Carla Long 20:30

I think that's super important. And you've brought up something, Gwen, that I've never really thought about before. So, I, I know the First Presidency hears from a lot of people in the church. I am pretty sure that your emails are full of things that are happening around the church. But a lot of those emails, I'm sure, come from a place of emotion, you know, like, an issue that people feel very strongly about and have decided to write to the First Presidency. And I'm sure that when they hear those things, like, it is a very emotional response. So, taking all of those issues to a group of trusted 12 people, people who may have an emotional response, or may not have an emotional response and can look at it the issue is more objectively, is a real gift. It's a real gift to the First Presidency to have that, and I'm, I'm sure they're grateful for it.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 21:19

I believe so, too. Uh, in the remarks that President Veazey shared back in 2012, and he's done so on other occasions, but that's the one I quoted earlier, he did say he valued the expertise and the understanding and, and the, uh, voices of people who were on the Standing High Council. I think the inclusion of this wider view makes it possible for the First Presidency to have input and helpful information that it simply would not have. I mean, one individual is going to have one individual's experience and perspective regard, I believe, regardless of who you are. But when you have other concerned individuals who are as committed as any of us are to building Christ's kingdom and bringing about peace, then what has my life, uh, what has my educational or professional experience said to me or helped me to understand that I can share with someone else so that they have, they being the First Presidency, have a broader way to come to decisions?

Carla Long 22:31

I guess? Absolutely. You said it much better than I did. Uh, wow. That is, that's a really interesting, I, I hadn't even really thought about that before. So, what a, what a gift for the First Presidency. Uh, you mentioned a little earlier, and I know that there's been some confusion about this, but (Uh, huh.) there's no such thing as church court anymore. Is that true? Like the Standing High Council used to hold court? Isn't that true? Or not?

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 22:59

I think they did have more court situations. I'll just have to say, I've never been involved in anything since I've been on the High Council for those 20 some years now that was anything like a court. So yeah, I'm, I'm not sure that happens.

Carla Long 23:16

I don't think it happens anymore, but I just wanted to clear that with you. I'm pretty sure that it's off the table now. We (Right, right.) (. . .)

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 23:22

And, and if I were to say identify the, the specific functions of what we address in broad terms, there are four things. One, we consider questions of moral and ethical significance. Two, we provide general advice and counsel to the First Presidency. Three, we consider appeals from field jurisdictions. Now, there haven't been any court appeals. But if there are questions that come up in jurisdictions, uh, we would, uh, review those. And this one has not been exercised to any significant degree, but may advise the Presiding Bishopric when requested by the First Presidency. We have had members of the Bishopric, you know, share with us and, of course, Stassi Cramm in her position had, you know, opportunity to dialogue there.

Carla Long 24:19

Uh, well, then maybe I'll get to talk to you as a Standing High Council member sometime in the future. Who knows? You know, Gwen, I already felt like a little bit of anxiety when you read that first one, when you read issues of moral and ethical, like, I, those kinds of things really stress me out when I have to think about those kinds of things. I, I'm a person who can see both sides really, really pretty clearly, I think, and, so, uh, when I heard that I'm like, Oh, my gosh, that sounds really, really hard. Really hard.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 24:49

Yeah, I, I, I have to say, for me, it is as well because we are attempting to talk about things that one, uh, affect people's lives and the council that is given may influence what the First Presidency says. I'm not saying we have the final word, but may influence. And there's so many variations of how life is experienced. So, to attempt to answer something from a place of love, and also a place of attempting to follow what you believe is the Holy Spirit's guidance, when we're talking about people from many cultures, many experiences, not from a judgmental perspective, but from a place of love and caring and guidance. It's a challenge.

Carla Long 25:53

It's a pretty hefty responsibility because it's, there's not only how you feel about that certain (Right.) issue, you know, you kind of have to step into what is God, where's God calling us to on this issue? And maybe where God is calling doesn't really fit your own personal theology. (Right. Right.) That would be so difficult to have to work through. Like, it feels like in a lot of these circumstances because when you read those ethical questions that you (Uh, huh.) have been through, like, all of them, made me a little bit uncomfortable. All of them.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 26:27

Yes, yes. And I, uh, I feel so blessed that as a faith community, we have taken this route, have been guided in this way to look at those issues that have impact on membership, you know, and the world, on membership, and made an effort to be as wise and as compassionate as we can be.

Carla Long 26:57

So, Gwen, this has just been a fascinating look at the Standing High Council. Thank you so much for saying all that you said, and I've learned so much. But is there anything else that you might want to say that, um, that you didn't get a chance to say?

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 27:11

Well, Carla, it may be repeating some of what I've said, but I just want to emphasize some things. One of those is that the work of the Standing High Council does sometimes take on the form of official statements presented to the church as official views of positions, such as the statement on abortion, an important question that the church faced. And another emphasis point for me is that the diversity of professional and academic training and perspectives that are found in the Standing High Council actually helped bring a broader understanding of how we approach topics and issues. Uh, the inclusion of diversity in a variety of forms, gender, age, orientation, ethnicity, our experiences, all of these within the Standing High Council demonstrate the church's intentionality to exhibit the enduring principle of unity in diversity. And through the blessing of the Holy Spirit, we can assist in supporting God's call to the church. And, on a more personal note, when I was asked in 1996 to serve on the Standing High Council of the church, I was humbled, excited and nervous about this opportunity. I interpreted this as an affirmation of my call as a High Priest to engage in envisioning the future. And at no time in my life had I thought that I would be asked to vision with this body. But here was an opportunity to serve the church, and most importantly, to serve God in a way that used my particular gifts. I was humbled to think that church leaders believed I had insights, experiences and professional skills that could contribute to the work of the Standing High Council. Now, I experience the grace and generosity of God as I and all of those on the Standing High Council recognize that we have been blessed and entrusted to participate in bringing to fruition our best interpretation of God's plan for this community of faith and God's world. I am especially appreciative of the opportunity this podcast gives to the membership or all those who are interested in knowing more about what makes up the body of not only the Standing High Council, but the goals and the efforts of the church to be God's ambassadors here on earth.

Carla Long 29:50

Well, I am grateful to you for sharing your knowledge, for sharing your wisdom, for letting us know exactly what the Standing High Council is because, again, I have said this like three times into this podcast, but I did not know what all you did and, and exactly where you were from and how you were even, came to be part of the Standing High Council. So, thank you so much, Gwen. It's been just fascinating for me to hear.

Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 30:12

Thank you, Carla.

Josh Mangelson 30:22

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