

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Brittany Mangelson 00:33

Hello, everyone, welcome to Project Zion Podcast. This is Brittany Mangelson. And I am bringing you once again another one of my favorite types of interviews. This is going to be part of the Fair Trade series, where we talk about faith transitions into Community of Christ. So, I've got on my friend, Evan Sharley, who is one of Community of Christ, newest members. He was just confirmed just a few weeks ago, through the Toronto congregation. And we are going to be talking about his history with faith and his journey to Community of Christ. So Evan, thanks for saying yes. And why don't you just give us you know, a couple sentences about who you are?

Evan Sharley 01:15

Yeah. I'm Evan. I live in Boise, Idaho. Yeah, basic overview of me. I've lived here my whole life. I liked it years ago. But Boise has gotten real big and real expensive to live in. So I'm looking at other places.

Brittany Mangelson 01:35

Yeah, I was actually reading an article about Boise and how much it's grown over the last 10 years and how expensive it's gotten. And it's definitely not the small town that it was when we were growing up, that's for sure.

Evan Sharley 01:49

Yeah, in some places, it's more expensive to live in than Portland is now. Wow. Wow. Yeah, but growing up here was nice. I grew up LDS, you know, I was kind of a weird kid. In when I was growing up, I really liked video games and nerdy stuff like that. I watched all of Doctor Who like, in one sitting over the course of two weeks. But like everybody else was super into basketball. And like, they did sports analogies in church all the time. And like, they're just going right over my head. And I just didn't understand it. And I wasn't included in a lot of things because of that. And yeah, I never really felt like I fit in. But I absolutely loved restoration stuff. Like I read the whole Doctrine and Covenants in seminary, high school seminary, and loved it, even though I didn't understand any of the historical context of what was happening. Then after that, I read the Book of Mormon cover to cover a couple of times. And yeah, I just loved all of that history and that identity. That's uniquely, it's unique. That belongs to a very small group of people. And I'm a part of that people. It feels cool.

Brittany Mangelson 03:19

Yeah, I definitely relate to that. That the restoration aspect of my faith tradition growing up, which was the same as you, is what intrigued me the most and kept me coming back. The story of the restoration was something that I was really drawn to. So I'm, I'm wondering, in your growing up in your experience as a little kid, then how was it in your family system? You know, was church something that was really important, really stressed as part of your formative years? How much of an emphasis was on God and spirituality? Or was it mostly tied to things like the Book of Mormon or, you know, what was the family culture that you grew up in? As far as religion goes?

Evan Sharley 04:06

Yeah. You know, my family never really did like scripture study, or like, family home evening kind of stuff. But my family was pretty consistent about going to church on Sunday. Like anytime scriptures were read, it was more of a self guided thing. So it was really, I wanted to read the scriptures. And I did. Yeah, so it wasn't, it wasn't overbearing, but like Sunday's were pushed pretty hard. And that was difficult for me. Especially the Sunday bit because a lot of people you know, I just didn't feel like I fit in on Sundays. I feel felt more at home, reading the scriptures and kind of contemplating it on my own and going and sharing it with people that I didn't really feel like I belonged to in a lot of ways

Brittany Mangelson 05:00

Yeah, so it sounds like the theology or doctrine or church history aspect of it, the study of it was self driven by you. But as far as church participation in the actual community and socializing, and I'm assuming, you know, activities and primary activities, young men's activities, that kind of thing was more family driven. Would that like, is that correct?

Evan Sharley 05:23

Yeah, I'd say for the most part. There were things that I liked, like, I really liked going on, like camp outs. We have gorgeous nature here in Idaho. And I was lucky to do Boy Scouts, and like, go camping once a month, like all of my teenage years, which was a lot of fun. But then we also did like a lot of stuff. Like we don't have any activities planned. We're just going to play basketball. Yeah. And yeah, those those weren't fun for me, kind of a chubby kid that didn't know how to play basketball.

Brittany Mangelson 05:57

Makes sense? And I mean, yeah, things like fellowship, you know, it's important as far as building community, but if you're more interested in church history, and things like that, like basketball, if that's not your thing, I can see why there definitely be a disconnect there.

Evan Sharley 06:13

Yeah, when I was a junior in high school, one of the things that I was most fascinated about was the Kirtland temple dedication, learning about it in seminary, and then kind of reading through the Scriptures a little bit, it was interesting. Hearing the experiences those people had, at the dedication

itself, and also the kind of rituals that led up to the temple dedication, it seemed like, you know, the distinction between heaven and earth was kind of blurred in a lot of ways. People had a lot of life changing experiences, that stuck with them, the rest of their lives. And in a lot of ways I felt like those experiences echoed throughout the generations, those foundational experiences have affected all of the restoration in a lot of ways. And I remember as a kid, being like, I want an experience like that, like I want to see angels and God and everything like that have visions, and like we hear that a lot in you know, with like Lehi's dream and Nephi's visions and everything like that. I kind of saw the Kirtland temple dedication as something very similar to that I wanted that for myself. And as a kid, I was like, if I read all of the D and C, I'll have an angel visit me. And I read all the D and C and was kind of like, any day now that angel is going to come and I'm going to have that visitation. And it never happened, which was really difficult for me. Because I kind of had this like confirmation of like, this is going to happen for me, but it never did. I moved on, as we all do with things like that. I when I was 18, the LDS Church changed its missionary age, to where I could go out a year earlier. And so I felt like a bunch of pressure to go out very quickly. I had a bishop, who's kind of like the pastor in the LDS church, who his son came back from a mission early, which is extremely taboo, especially at that time. It's a little bit more accepted today. But back in that day, it was like hard no. And he was projecting a lot of things onto me. And was making me do a whole bunch of make me jump through a whole bunch of hoops that were unnecessary. And I was dating a girl at the time. And it got to the point where I told my Bishop like I either want to be out on a mission in two months, which was completely reasonable, or I'm going to marry my girlfriend. And he said, No, that's not reasonable. And so like 18 hours later, I was married--at 18. Don't get married at 18. It's a bad idea. Tell your friends. It's very, yeah, it. Yeah, I don't recommend it. But her and I were better. We'll get to that.

Brittany Mangelson 09:53

So I'm wondering if you felt any stigma against you and your wife at the time, you know, did you receive pushback from family or friends or even church leadership for just simply getting married instead of, you know, quote, unquote, doing what you were supposed to do by going on a mission and that kind of thing?

Evan Sharley 10:20

I will get to that. But there's another aspect of that, that I think is important to talk about.

Brittany Mangelson 10:24

Yeah. Okay, keep going.

Evan Sharley 10:26

One of, the LDS Church is very, very into purity culture. Like you cannot have sex before marriage. And we were little 18 year olds with repressed sexual feelings, and the only way to have sex, you know, legally, was to get married. And that was one of the bigger factors, I think, for my ex-wife and I getting married. And it led to a lot of pain in a lot of different ways. I'm thankful that her and I didn't have kids,

because her and I ultimately weren't compatible. And I think that purity culture really pushes a lot of people into positions like that, I know, I'm not unique in this sort of positions. So that was difficult in and of itself. But once I did get married, it was everyone assumed that she was pregnant. And it was kind of a shotgun marriage. And we were her and I were kind of treated as second class citizens in a lot of ways. And I kind of realized, like, since I didn't go on a mission, I would not have the same opportunities as other men who did go on missions, the rest of my life. I would always be a bit of a, you know, a second class citizen, which was really difficult to accept that I would be treated differently because my life took kind of a different direction than other people's.

Brittany Mangelson 12:17

Yeah, I can see that that would be the stereotype or the assumption that people would bring into your relationship, which is ridiculous to say that people bring assumptions into a relationship. But yeah, you are absolutely right. As far as Mormon culture goes, that there really aren't any options for staying worthy. And doing that outside of marriage. So

Evan Sharley 12:46

Yeah, it was weird. But no, as it always does, life goes on. Her and I ended up going through the LDS temples, washing, anointing, endowment, and sealing ceremonies. Which was nice, because before that, a lot of people didn't see her and I's marriage is like valid. Like it wasn't a real marriage, because it didn't happen in the temple. Like there were people that were saying, like, you shouldn't have sex with your spouse because you weren't sealed in the temple, because it's not a real marriage, which was just insane to me. Like, I don't know. Yeah. But I did the thing. It was odd, to say the very least. And yeah, after my ex-wife and I got sealed and endowed and everything, we moved to a new ward, where we were the absolute youngest people in there who weren't kids. And we were 20 at this point. And yeah, we were given callings, and we weren't super jazzed about them. And so we decided to kind of stop attending church for a while. And instead, I was going to spend my Sundays doing research because I absolutely love anything having to do with the Latter-day Saint movement, like I just gobble all that up. I love it. And I really loved studying the Doctrine and Covenants. But as I was reading the Doctrine and Covenants as a teenager, I could tell but there was a lot of missing context that I wasn't getting from just reading the D and C. So I decided to start looking around and I found the ex-Mormon subreddit. And at that time, it was the ex-Mormon separate, it was a whole nother beast like, that was another lifetime ago for that community. I joined when it had like, less than 15,000 subscribers and I think it's getting close to 200,000 subscribers in March 2021. And there were people like Mithran, who I'm friends with now he's a cool guy who posted like a whole bunch of historical stuff that was just incredible. And I'd never heard about, and I was super excited to learn about. And it was a lot of fun kind of doing that. But I always kind of kept the ex-Mormon community at arm's length because like, you know, they're apostates and like, it's full of half truths and everything like that, which is ridiculous, but that's what it was at the time for me. And after months and months and months of being told, on the ex-Mormon subreddit to read the CES Letter, on February 6, 2015, I did. I read it all in one sitting over eight hours. And it left me shocked, like disassociating, reality warping, completely shocked. I didn't know who I was, I didn't

know who I could trust. I felt like my life was built on a lie in a lot of ways. And there was just nothing. It was emptiness. It was despair. It was panic, that, like, you can't fully comprehend how scary that is. Like, I've tried to express this to family and friends what it feels like having such a snap experience. I went from a fully believing member of the LDS church to being an atheist. In eight hours. I lost my lifelong religion in such a short amount of time. And it was scary. And like I had read enough on the ex-Mormon subreddit to know like, it's almost a 50-50 whether your close family and friends ever talk to you again. I just didn't know what to do.

Brittany Mangelson 17:39

So really quick, yeah. Can you can you just give us a brief brief overview of what the CES Letter is? Because I'm assuming that there's the Community of Christ folks that don't know what you're talking about although I fully do and, oh, my heart just goes out to you because it is scary to have that foundation completely ripped out from you. But

Evan Sharley 18:00

Yeah, yeah, it's, uh, you know, one of the differences between Community of Christ and the LDS Church is like, how, what the relationship with history has been, for generations at this point. You know, the, I grew up, for example, being told that the Book of Mormon was translated, like with Joseph Smith's finger on the golden plates reading along, reading it to Oliver Cowdery. And that's how the Book of Mormon came about kind of a deal. And that's the only narrative that was given about the Book of Mormon, and there's pictures and art and like movies and stuff with that depiction, reinforcing that depiction of it. But the CES Letter is about, when I read it, it was about an 80 page PDF, which showed how that narrative that the LDS Church puts forth, doesn't necessarily align with historical records. For example, the Book of Mormon largely was translated with the scrying method of a peep stone of putting a little rock in a hat with Joseph Smith's face in the hat kind of a deal, and he read the words of the Book of Mormon off of this stone, is how the historical accounts go. And it, there's hundreds of examples of this, of things that were that didn't make sense. Like there's horses in America in the Book of Mormon, but the time period that the Book of Mormon would have been taking place there weren't horses, the nature of God changes between the versions of the Book of Mormon from a Trinitarianistic or Trinitarian outlook of the Divine to more of the later theological developments of the Divine. Like the Mark Hoffman stuff, the Mark Hoffman, forgeries are mentioned, polygamy was mentioned and I didn't know anything about Joseph Smith's polygamy really, let alone to the extent of it. I didn't know that there were different accounts of the first vision. I didn't know about the Kinderhook plates, the changes of the between the book of commandments and the Doctrine and Covenants, of Freemasonry, stuff, like it is dizzying when you've just heard whispers of these little things, and then just to get so much more context so quickly. And that's what the CES Letter is, is it's one consolidated place for all of that. And it's difficult when you are raised in a community where you didn't have the full story. And you were expected to have just the one narrative.

Brittany Mangelson 21:20

And for me, one thing about the CES Letter is it's my understanding that when it started, it was a sincere plea to church leadership. So CES stands for church educational system within the LDS church. And so this man, Jeremy Runnells, was writing a letter to a contact that he had at the church educational system or a friend of a friend or something like that. And he was saying, help me, I want to stay active. I'm not finding anything of any sort of rebuttal to these issues that would, you know, convince me to stay in the LDS Church. Do you know about these? What do I do with these? And ultimately, his plea was ignored, and then he--did he end up getting excommunicated? Not that we need to spend a ton of time, but yeah, he's no longer in the church because his his questions were ignored.

Evan Sharley 22:13

Mm hmm. He was called in for an excommunication hearing court. And he ended up making his case, but at the court, but then he ended up resigning. Okay. Which is an important distinction for him.

Brittany Mangelson 22:27

Yeah. Yeah. And that's, that's fair. But yeah, the whole point is that questions are not met kindly. And like you said, Community of Christ definitely has a different understanding and relationship with history, which to me makes all the difference. But I just wanted to make sure that our Community of Christ listeners understood what you were, what you were talking about. So keep going.

Evan Sharley 22:53

Yeah, it's one of those things like, I just take for granted. A lot of the people that I chat with, like, they know what the CES Letter is. And, like a lot of people, Community of Christ don't. Yeah, after that, it was--I got to drink a beer on my 21st birthday. Which was neat. Had I hate beer, though, it's so nasty. It took years for me to get to like coffee to. It is just terrible. But I found, like, I was going through this, more or less alone. And I kind of figured, like, I can't be going like there's got to be other people that are going through similar things as me. And so I put the word out on the ex-Mormon subreddit of like, hey, if anybody's in Boise, like, let's meet up on a Sunday, and like chat, and just like support each other, as we're going through this. I got dozens and dozens and dozens of people coming to these meetups when I was running them. And I found that there was already a Boise ex-Mormon group. And we were able to really find support and connection with each other. Hear a lot of that. The posts that I was making publicly helped a lot of people find that support and community while they were going through this despair and anger and betrayal that they were feeling as well. Yeah, it was, it was, it was nice. I after I left the LDS church, I became an atheist for a time. The idea of God being an old bearded white guy in the sky just didn't make sense to me. And that was the only interpretation of God that I had been exposed to. I'm still atheistic towards that sort of a god, as I say today. Ultimately, I just didn't find atheism fulfilling. I tried to start Oasis, which was kind of like, almost like an atheistic church. But it didn't take off in Boise and yeah, and so I started looking at like other religions, are there any other traditions that would allow me to have that spirituality without the need for supernatural stuff was a really big thing for me. Because like I don't necessarily think like the Red Sea was literally parted by

Moses and other sort of miracles, but we'll get to how I view scripture later. But I briefly looked into like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Wicca, Taoism, the Nordic tradition, kind of looked into Native American traditions as well. But like, it never really resonated with me. Yeah, it just didn't make sense. And I was lamenting to a friend one time about this and she said, Well, there's this podcast called the secular Buddhism podcast, that's run by another ex-Mormon from Park City, his name is Noah Rasheta. And so I listened to his podcast, and three episodes in and I was like, completely hooked. I was like, This is what I've been looking for. It is helping me, you know, understand myself, kind of understand the world that I'm in, helped me kind of, like deal with these emotions that I'm going through. Yeah, so Buddhism, it spoke to me. One of the problems when I had studied Buddhism a little bit before was, when I was studying it, it was very much from an Eastern mindset, like, there was a lot of Sanskrit and like, kind of building off of assumptions that you already knew, and everything like that. And with the secular Buddhism podcast, it was kind of like, the ground level for learning Buddhism in the Western world. Like fundamentals is what we're going to talk about, and then we'll build off from those. And it really taught me to like, you know, deal with what's going on in my life, and like, accept me for who I am, and accept the world for what it is around me, taught me how to meditate. And at this point, my, my marriage with my ex-wife wasn't doing very well so it helped me a lot to get through that as well, which was very nice. I'm, I'm a very intense person. And so I decided to, I wanted to kind of be held accountable for learning about Buddhism. So I ended up taking the same ministry course that Noah Rasheta did, through Bright Dawn Center of Oneness, which is based at a Coarsegold, California. And for my ministry course, we read books and wrote essays in like, a message board. And then we had chats every Sunday over the phone. And I did that for two years. And I got ordained and everything. We called it inducted. I got inducted as a minister, and it was awesome. During my ministry course, I really kind of said, like, I'm not happy in this marriage. Her and I had really kind of grown up and grown apart because 18 year olds should not get married. Yeah. And after I separated from my ex- wife, I started hanging out with a lot of really cool friends. I ended up going to like music festivals and stuff, and I got into psychedelics, which were a lot of fun. And, you know, I really kind of found a lot of peace. Psychedelics, I know. . . I like to say that if Community of Christ can accept me, they can accept anyone. And I do feel very accepted in Community of Christ. And one of the reasons for that is the enduring principle of unity in diversity. I'm different than a lot of folks in Community of Christ, but I think I bring a unique perspective to the table. Psychedelics helped me see the beauty in life; see the beauty in nature. You know, I like to ask people like when's the last time that you physically touched a tree. That's something that a lot of times only kids really do is they're like climbing it, you know, but like with psychedelics, I feel like, I can connect with nature a little bit more and like go and like touch a touch a tree. And like, really admire the beauty of it and see like the branches fractally out and like look at the sky. And you know, feel enveloped in stars and just one with like, all of creation and just the healing, mentally, emotionally and spiritually from all of that. I found that through responsible psychedelic usage. In a lot of ways, it was that Kirtland temple dedication, experience that I had been longing for, for so many years. And I feel like I felt like I really found it with psychedelic usage. Peace connection to God. Yeah, which is a little bit interesting, a little bit different from the norm. That's the way my, my, my story is gone. And then in 2019, I was reading--let me go back a little bit. I have

always felt this connection to the restoration. There's a bit of a different vernacular between Community of Christ and LDS folks or ex-Mormons kind of a deal. Typically, I use the word Mormon instead of Latter-day Saint movement. If you're familiar with Sunstone, Lindsay Hansen Park, who is a gift to everyone, to all of humanity, she likes to say there's more than one way to Mormon. And so I tend to use the word Mormon as a very umbrella term. But when I left the LDS church, I felt for a while, like, I didn't have a claim to my Mormon identity anymore, which was extremely difficult for me because like, it's, you know, for a lot of people, it's not just a religion. It's, you know, a family history, it's the traditions. It's the music, like, in my confirmation a couple of weeks ago, I had the Spirit of God played because it means so much to me. And like, it meant so much to my ancestors and everything like that, and I tried to, I didn't feel entitled to that identity anymore. And then one day I read the poem called Pioneers by Carolyn Pearson. And I want to read it here because it--this is one of the most pivotal works of art that I've ever read my entire life. It goes, my people were Mormon pioneers. Is the blood still good? They stood in awe as truth flew by like a dove and dropped a feather in the West. Where truth flies, you follow if you're a pioneer. I've searched the skies now and then another feather has fallen. I've packed the handcart again, packed it with the precious things and thrown away the rest. I was singing by the fires at night out there on uncharted ground, where I am my own captain of 10s, where I blow the bugle, bring myself to morning prayer, map out the miles and never know when or where or if at all I will finally say this is the place. I face the plains on a good day for walking. The sun rises, the mist clears. I will be all right. My people are Mormon pioneers.

Brittany Mangelson 34:50

I love it.

Evan Sharley 34:52

I'm getting like teary reading that.

Brittany Mangelson 34:54

Yeah.

Evan Sharley 34:55

And when I read that, I kind of, I kind of thought like, you know, I'm not disgracing my Mormon identity by leaving the LDS church, I'm emulating it. I'm exemplifying it. I don't know where the place is. But it's, the truth is out there. As X Files would say, but I didn't know where I would end up. But I knew that I had to go. And that's, in my opinion, one of the most Mormon things that you could do is follow truth. And so then I tried to really kind of lay out what this identity, what you would call this identity that I felt, I talked to like a whole bunch of people. And the ultimate conclusion that I came to was it's an ethnicity, similar to, so there's different kinds of ethnicities that are formed around different things. For example, ethnic groups can be found, founded around language, nationality, race, religion, region. And some examples of those include like Slavs, Armenians, African Americans, Basques, and in my opinion Mormons founded around religion and ethno religious identity. One of the best examples for

that is Jewish people. You can be Jewish, but not necessarily believe the Jewish faith. And, in my opinion, that is what Mormon is, to me at least. And I've I've done a lot of thinking and I think that ethnicity really kind of kicked off, in Kirtland when we had like our real first homeland. We really became a people. Yeah, and so I had this identity. But I didn't--it was it was disconnected spiritually, for me in a lot of ways. And after years of like, being on the ex- Mormon subreddit, and then later on the Mormon subreddit, where I ended up becoming a moderator, and like, really helping build community and everything like that, and reading books, and listening to podcasts, and everything like that, I stumbled upon an episode on the naked Mormonism podcast, which is about early restoration history. And one of the episodes was called Smith entheogen theory. And entheogen is the spiritual use of psychedelics. And this theory, essentially, put forward the idea that Joseph Smith was familiar with psychedelics, and had a lot of his early spiritual experiences based off of those psychedelics. They talked about, like the first vision, they talked about the Kirtland temple dedication, they talked a lot about, like blessings that people had, where the heavens just opened to them for hours at a time, they talked about how you're exhausted after you've been, I think the term is quickened. For just hours, you're just exhausted and like, it was a perspective shift. I was like, holy cow, I had those kind of Kirtland temple dedication experiences of my own with psychedelics, and now you're telling me, the Kirtland temple dedication itself may have been influenced by psychedelics. And it was one of those things of like, I need to do more research on this immediately. And I ended up reading *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship*, by David John--I think it's David John Brugger. That may not be how you pronounce his last name, but it had a lot of the first hand accounts of people who were in those rituals and at the temple dedication, and reading it, reading those first hand accounts with kind of the idea that they were having entheogenic experiences, spiritual psychedelic experiences, it just clicked. And I was like, I, I need to see if there's any value for me spiritually within the Latter-day Saint movement anymore. Because my most spiritual experiences that I've had in my life make a little bit more sense now, like is there a community where I could express spirituality in a way that kind of speaks to my ethnic heritage, and kind of a fun side fact, Frederick M. Smith was actually a big fan of peyote. In the Herald, he talked about peyote and like he encouraged people to use it. And he said, like, it helps, it helped him feel closer to God. And at that time, he kind of said, like, it's the opposite of alcohol. And what's funny is, I'm kind of the same way I don't drink alcohol at all anymore, because I get it's just terrible. It tastes bad. Like, I don't like how it makes me feel. But like psychedelics, they helped me connect to myself, those I love, to God, the universe, and it's just great. And it was crazy, seeing Frederick M. Smith, say the same sort of thing. This is crazy. This is crazy. And so I reached out to my friend Mithran. And he got me in touch with the dude who runs religious humanism, who's an ex-Mormon, too, and very connected, very nice guy. And I was talking to him, and I was like, do you know of any community that can fit these needs? And he's like, why not Community of Christ it, it seems to fit all your needs. And I'm going to tell you that story that I told you before, which was my first exposure to Community of Christ, which was ridiculous. So there's such a disconnect between Community of Christ folks, and like LDS folks or ex-Mormon folks, there's not a lot of crossover. And so I remember when I was just leaving the LDS church I asked, like, you know, what does Community of Christ do in their temples? And someone told me that what they do, what we do in our temple, because I am Community

of Christ now is what we do in the temple is like, you get in a sleeping bag, full of like goo, or something like that. And like, there's like a ritualistic thing with like chanting, or like a reading or something like that you like come out of this sleeping bag, and you're like, you're a butterfly now. And I was like, What? That sounds nuts.

Brittany Mangelson 43:23

Out of all the misconceptions that a Mormon or former Mormon could have that is the most bizarre one I think I've ever heard. I just want to go on record and say that,

Evan Sharley 43:36

Oh, man, it's so weird because it got everything wrong. Yeah, it's so weird. But that was my first and only exposure to Community of Christ for like, the first five years after leaving the LDS Church. There, there was a Community of Christ fellow on Reddit who more or less kind of kept to himself, but people asked him questions like summoned him, pinged him on Reddit, he'd show up and ask questions, but yeah. But there was a lot of misconception with that. And that turned me off to Community of Christ for quite a while.

Brittany Mangelson 44:27

No gooey sleeping bags for you.

Evan Sharley 44:29

No, it's so weird. Yeah. And so after my religious humanism friend said, Look into Community of Christ, I, I did. So I looked up like Community of Christ on Google. And a lot of the interviews that John Hamer did, popped up. And I was really amazed at how eloquent John is. Like how frank he is, and how transparent he is. And like on Mormon Stories, if you're not familiar with Mormon Stories, it's run by a dude named John Dehlin who just interviews people kind of like Brittany. But yeah, and like, John has like, hours and hours and hours and hours and hours worth of stuff on that podcast and like, did an entire like history series that takes you through, like 1828 to like modern day. And I was blown away. And I wanted to learn more. And I heard John mention a couple of times in those podcasts, and the Mormon Stories podcast, he mentioned Project Zion. And so I started listening to Project Zion as well. And I was blown away by what I was learning about Community of Christ. This was last year, when I started doing this in 2020, before the world fell apart, at this point. I learned like about LGBT acceptance, continuing revelation, common consent, like what World Conference looks like. I learned about the temples, how the temple is on the temple lot, how open the temples are, how Community of Christ has let go of old cultural biases, how the priesthood ban was lifted on women. And there was never a racial priesthood ban, and like, just blown away. And then like John was talking about, like different interpretations that you can take of Scripture. And at this point, in my life, the only interpretation of Scripture that I had been exposed to was literalistic. Scripture must be a history book. And John, like, kind of exposed me to a different interpretations of Scripture. And like, Scripture doesn't need to be a history consult. You know, the moral of the story like the three little pigs doesn't need to be

a historical story to tell a message. Same kind of thing with Scripture. And I was, I was just blown away by the openness of it. And like, I reached out to like John and had him do like kind of a Q&A on the Mormon subreddit and like, talked with like Robin Linkhart, an apostle, and like, I'm friends with like three apostles on Facebook. And it's like, no big deal. And, like, everybody's so open and kind and talkative, and everything and Community of Christ is so cool. And I kind of, there were a couple of problems that I had with Community of Christ for a little while. That's a whole nother podcast, those problems, and I, I didn't think Community of Christ was going to work for me for a while. And so I decided to see if there was anything else that was out there for me. And the only other real option was the fellowship of the remnants, which are the Snufferites, who are kind of an informal gathering of folks who, this is an oversimplification, it's complex. But they kind of broke off from the LDS church, and don't really recognize the prophetic succession of even Brigham Young. And so I kind of looked in to if that community would be a viable option for me, and it wasn't. And so I was like, You know what, I'll just start my own community. And like I, it was essentially just like me and two other people getting together on Sunday to do like, communion and like, talk about theological concepts and everything like that. And it was fun for a while, I made some, some good friends from it. But like, it got to the point where like, John Hamer was releasing those lectures every week, that are just knock it out of the ballpark. And I found myself talking about what John's congregation was doing more than I was talking about what my congregation was doing. And so I reached out to Jerry, one of my friends and said, like, what do I do, like, I have these problems with Community of Christ and, but I really want Community of Christ to work and like, oh, what do I do? And he said, Well, why don't you just like, send John Hamer a message and like, ask, like, sit and talk to talk with him. And so I did. And John was like, yeah, let's talk at this time, and I told John, like, I have these problems, and they're preventing me from really feeling comfortable joining Community of Christ, because I felt like I would be relegated to kind of a second class citizen in Community of Christ. And a lot of the stuff of, with my ex-wife at this point, like, was coming up of like, I don't want to be seen as a second class citizen, in communities that I will inevitably pour a lot of my soul into. I don't want to be seen as lesser than in my own community. And I was kind of taken aback by what John said, he said, don't worry about it. I will go up to bat for you, and you will not be treated like a second class citizen in this congregation. Whatever you feel called to in our congregation, I will go up to bat for you, you will be treated as lesser than, and I was, it, I had never had someone really go to bat for me like that in a spiritual community. It meant a lot. And right then and there, I was, like, I'm going to join, Community of Christ then. And so a couple of months went by. And I decided that I wanted to be confirmed into Community of Christ. At this point, mind you, the pandemic has been going on, I've never met someone from Community of Christ in person before, which is crazy. And, but I'm joining the church like, this community makes sense. It, they're kind, they speak to me, I'm a bisexual, male, and like, they're completely welcoming of me. And like, all of the problems that I had with this community just melted away, and I feel support, I feel loved. I feel home here. And so I decided to join. And I decided that I wanted my confirmation to take place on February 6, 2021, which was the sixth anniversary of me leaving the LDS church, I kind of saw it as like an open and closed date. Really meaningful day, every year on February 6, I kind of do like a review of what my life has looked like since I left the LDS church, and it just keeps getting better. Yeah, I messaged you,

and asked you if you would take part in the confirmation. And you did and it was so lovely. It was such a wonderful confirmation. I'm so glad it's on YouTube so I can go back and and listen to it again. Because like in the moment, I gleaned like 30% of it, I think. So it's fun to be able to go back through and read and watch it. Everything like that. More or less catches up to today, of what my my journey has kind of look like.

Brittany Mangelson 54:01

Evan, I'm just so struck by your story and all of the different places that it took you and spiritual explorations and just coming to terms with who you are. And feeling like no community would embrace you all while you're going through relationships and marriage and figuring out just so many things are just colliding

Evan Sharley 54:28

Got remarried during all of this time. Yeah. Or one year anniversary was just yesterday. Yeah. And like, yeah, it's been a wild ride.

Brittany Mangelson 54:41

Yeah, so much to analyze and deconstruct and reconstruct and trying to find a sense of belonging and then to be able to reach out to John Hamer and have him be able to work through some of these hiccups and to just have that, you know, quote unquote, authority figure. I know that Community of Christ really shies away from that, but to have, you know, a seventy in Community of Christ who's very public, to just say, like, Look, we're here for you, you know, you are going to be accepted in my congregation, no questions asked. I can only imagine how that feels after this intense isolation, that is a faith transition out of the LDS Church. So, I just want to validate that that's, that's huge. That's absolutely huge. Yeah, it's an and, I was so struck when you said that at this point, you've never met anyone face to face in Community of Christ. And that's so true. And the power of online ministry, I, Wow, that's, that really is incredible when you think about it, that this whole thing has happened because of the Internet. Everything has taken place over the Internet, Zoom calls, Reddit threads, Facebook, all of those things have really allowed you to find a place in Community of Christ. So, that's what a what a testimony for online ministries. Love it. So I guess you know, to wrap up, I'm just always curious to know, what are your hopes for Community of Christ? I mean, you've been through so much with religion and spirituality and faith. What do you hope your church experience looks like? What are your hopes for the institution of the church at large? What are your thoughts on that?

Evan Sharley 56:28

Yeah, I'm working on a really big project right now, which is a lot of fun. I am working on a plain English version of the Book of Mormon, I'm calling it the Book of Mormon plain and precious truths. So it'll be abbreviated PPT. The Book of Mormon, I found a lot of people in Community of Christ aren't as familiar with the Book of Mormon. And those in Community of Christ, who are familiar with the Book of Mormon used to be LDS, at least in my experience, that's the case. And so I feel like one of the

reasons why that is, is the Book of Mormon is in that King James English. And a lot of stuff is like, hard to understand. And kind of ambiguous. And so I'm going through verse by verse, really trying to put it in, convey the message of the verse in contemporary English. And I'm doing like, headings and like sub headings and sub sub headings. So you can kind of follow along what's going on in the story of like, you know, this is Jacob's sermon, and he's talking about this in the Second Book of Nephi, chapter, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And my stretch goal is to have the whole book of Mormon, which is around 500 pages, have all of it completed in 2030, for the 200th anniversary of the publication of the Book of Mormon, yeah, I mean, kind of a dream of mine is that this would kind of be a successor to the revised Authorized Version of the Book of Mormon, which would be super cool. And I've been talking to people like Elray Henriksen, about getting some help with that. And I've been talking to John, about moving this project forward in the best way possible. And so it's a lot of fun. That's one of the things I'd like to contribute to the community. Let's make the Book of Mormon a little bit more accessible.

Brittany Mangelson 58:40

Yeah, I think that's really important. Because I know most people that I've talked to, that are around our age in Community of Christ, have not read the Book of Mormon, or don't know much about it. And whatever your beliefs are about it, it's still a it's still a story. It's still a story of a people of faith. And there is some value in it. So that is, I'm very intrigued by this project. And I will be the first to place an order for one because I think that it's--Uh, yeah, the Book of Mormon, something that I haven't necessarily revisited since I was a teenager, when I was reading it just purely out of obligation. And I did not study it as a missionary or anything. So I think that I would benefit from a more modernized version of it, you know, modernized language of it, for sure.

Evan Sharley 59:32

Yeah, one of the things that I've been surprised about with Community of Christ is like, how inclusive it is down to a theological level with like D and C 164 with like the inclusion of LGBT people like the affirmation of marriage equality and gender identity, within our Doctrine and Covenants. That is huge. But it's--we're so unknown. I, I found that a lot of Community of Christ folks don't understand how profound things like you know, sexual orientation and gender identity are to people like me. Like, it's crazy. We need to learn how to talk about it a little bit better, because we don't know what we have. And like, that's just the tip of the iceberg of, of what we have like the the different interpretations of Scripture, the affirmation unity and diversity is so profound. Like I said, like, if Community of Christ can accept me, it can accept anybody. And I like to say that I am a bisexual entheogenic panentheist? And I, my opinion is I feel like my opinion is valued in Community of Christ, which is awesome. Yeah. So I'd like to see us lean into our strengths a little bit more.

Brittany Mangelson 1:01:22

Yeah, yeah. I was recently talking to some folks, actually, just in our we had a little mission center conference just yesterday, and I brought up how profound some of the same things are that that you just mentioned. And, and I also added faithful disagreement and paired with unity in diversity, and in this

age, of, of not bridging that gap, the political gap, the just really polarized opinions that society has on so many topics, I mean, they're endless, and yet and Community of Christ, were able to at least hear the other side and pastorally have a conversation. And that's not to say that we can't disagree or debate or whatever. I mean, we do that with the best of them, but, but the fact that we at least, try to uphold the worth of all people, and to celebrate diversity, for diversity sake, and to work through our differences in a very grace-filled peaceful way, I think is completely radical. And it is so countercultural to anything that you see when you turn on the TV, or when you open your computer and get on Facebook. I mean, it's, it's, it's a big deal. And, and even you know, it's a big deal among religions there. There is not very many religions that can hold that tension of theology and doctrine and culture and whatever, policy, all the things and yet Community of Christ has found a way to do that. And make decisions through common consent, while upholding the worth and voice of all, and I am, I will never stop being amazed by that. I mean, I truly, truly am amazed. So yeah, I agree that sometimes Community of Christ people are like, Oh, yeah, well, we have this document called Faithful disagreement. I'm like, Do you realize what this says is amazing? People are like, okay, enthusiastic convert, but.

Brittany Mangelson

So Evan, I always like to just kind of end these with throwing it back to you and saying, you know, is there anything that you didn't get to say, anything that you want to just leave us with as your final thoughts?

Evan Sharley 1:03:51

Well, in preparation for this, I ended up writing out my whole faith journey. And it was like 11 pages long. And it was too unwieldy to just repeat here, but you can't contain a whole human life in you know, an hour podcast. And so I did the best I could, as I stumbled through. But like, we we got something special with Community of Christ. It resonates with a lot of people. Continuing revelation to do things like lift priesthood bands and give become a more inclusive community is profound. And we need to realize what we got. Because it could help a lot of people it helped me feel welcomed and feel like I can be part of a community again, which is really nice. Yeah, that's about it.

Brittany Mangelson 1:04:57

Yeah, ah, again, I just relate to everything that you said, and my thoughts are right there with you. I think that as far as especially as far as the restoration goes, Community of Christ is sitting on a culture and on a way of being, and on a theology about Jesus, the peaceful one that is unmatched. And I like being loud about that, because I really see so much harm in other religious circles, and in other communities, and it out my own front door. It's, yeah, it's definitely a message worth sharing. So thank you for sharing your story. Yeah, I know, I got to read over your 11 page, faith transition story. And it was really good. And again, just so relatable. I think I shared, but so many of these stories have such familiar threads, to my own story and to all the faith transition stories that we've had on Project Zion and even not just faith transitions from the LDS church, but just a wide variety of people who have found a home in Community of Christ. So thank you so much for sharing your story of it. Yeah. Yeah,

Evan Sharley 1:06:14

I was really happy to and like, I totally agree with you. Like, so many of us have the same, same background. It's crazy. When Elle Mills, Elle Mills Warner, her name?. When she was on like I was I related so much to her story. And like every one of the Latter-day Seekers, I'm like, ah, me too. Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 1:06:41

I really. Yeah. Well, thanks for adding your voice to the choir.

Josh Mangelson 1:06:55

Thanks for listening to Project Zion Podcast, subscribe to our podcast on Apple podcast, Stitcher, or whatever podcast streaming service you use. And while you're there, give us a five star rating. Project Zion Podcast is sponsored by Latter-day Seeker Ministries of Community of Christ. The views and opinions expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Latter-day Seeker Ministries, or Community of Christ. Music has been graciously provided by Dave Heinze.