

Josh Mangelson

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

Hello, everyone. Welcome to another episode of the Project Zion Podcast. This is Brittany Mangelson and I will be your host for today, and we have another addition of our Chai Can't Even series, which are turning out to be some of my absolute favorite interviews to do because we talked to some adults in the church and we talk to young adults about their experience in Community of Christ past, present and their hopes for the future. And it's just a lot of fun to hear from the younger generation and their perspective on church and faith and community. So today we have on Ashley Sebree, who is a young adults in Oklahoma, and I'm really excited to have her own today. So, actually, why don't you just give us a little elevator pitch of who you are?

Ashley Sebree

Thanks, pretty. I'm really excited to be here. I absolutely love Project Zion Podcast. So it's truly an honor to be here with you, eh? So I'm like, she said, I'm Ashley Sebree and I am an ordained priest and Community of Christ. I am on the Oklahoma Mission Center leadership team, and I do all of the communications for the mission center. So I run the social media pages, the website, and you all of the mailing lists. So I really enjoy it. And, um, yeah.

Brittany Mangelson

I briefly forgot about that when you did all those camp takeovers and just how you promoted the camps in Oklahoma last summer. That was when my girl crush on you just flourished because you totally rocked it. You're usage of stickers and GIFs and or is it GIFs? We don't have to get into this conversation we're here.

Ashley Sebree

I think it's GIFs.

Brittany Mangelson

GIFs. Okay, I think that's what I usually say. But it just came out, Jiffs, And then I had a moment of insecurity. But anyways, you rock social media and it makes me really happy. So, uh, yeah, I'm really excited to have this conversation today. So as maybe our listeners know by now, our Chai Can't Even series. We just kind of start at the very beginning of your story with Community of Christ and then work our way on up. So why don't you get us started by just answering. If you grew up Community of Christ or what was your conversion story? Did you attend camps? What? What did church look like for you as a kid?

Ashley Sebree

So I have been in a lifelong member of Community of Christ. I grew up going to the Heartland congregation in Oklahoma City, which is where I go now. And growing up, my grand parents were both priesthood members. Well, they're still both priesthood members, and my mom was a member of our church. She wasn't very active in the church, and my dad wasn't a member of our church, but, um, my parents got divorced really early, so it wasn't a big deal of kind of choosing between churches, but I always have attended the Community of Christ church. I got baptized at eight years old, actually, by my grandpa, and it was actually really sweet because all of my cousins, who are much older than me and my older sister, actually all waited until I turned eight years old to get baptized, and we all got baptized together. I think there was about six of us. Um and so is a really special day, and as I grew up in the church, I did start attending camps at a young age. I think I was in about fourth grade when I first started attending camp, and I met so many wonderful people that I'm still friends with today and so many staff members that have really been like mentors to me in my whole life today as well. But as I kind of grew up in Community of Christ, I started taking on different leadership roles, and they really started pushing me towards, um, developing who I am in my own spiritually journey and growth. And so I really always felt like I had a really positive experience in the church, and my life was really kind of. It always just revolved around church and the camping experience and just really everything Cool ommunity of Christ.

Brittany Mangelson

So from a total outsider's perspective and by outsider, I mean, I'm not in Oklahoma. It seems like the camping program in Oklahoma is really, really strong. And I mean, I met your delegation that Speck and you guys had a ton of campers, a ton of staff, and I know that there's multiple camps going on in your missions and our every year. So Well, I guess. What can you tell me about the camping experience in Oklahoma like it just seems like there's something special about the way that you all do it down in Oklahoma. Is that true?

Ashley Sebree

Well, I think it's true, but I may be a little bit biased. I think, honestly, the camping experience is probably the thing that we do best from a young age. Everyone is encouraged to go to camp and not just youth camps. We have to family camps in Oklahoma that for different groups of people, and really, just from the time that you were, I started attending camp, actually a family camp when I was six months old and just kept going back every summer with my grandma in, like I'm saying so by the time you're in elementary school, you know if you want to go to camp, there's no they won't turn you away if you can't afford it financially, and so it's very inclusive for all families and just really everyone. And I think that there's such a unique spirit that we haven't camp. It really is like one big family at spec. Everyone always kind of laughs at the Oklahoma delegation in a way because everyone just seems like their brothers and sisters, by the way. They treat each other and they laugh with one another, but also the way that they support one another. And so, really, just the way that we act as a family, not only at family camp, but you can't. And it's back, really is just something so special and so unique. And I really do feel like the people that I went to camp with our family and that the people that I've been on staff with are like family today, too.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, well, like I said, I could definitely sense that being around your delegation, there was just an energy to it. I don't know how to describe it, and I wasn't even necessarily planning on bringing this up. But as you were talking about camp, it was just like, Yeah, there is something about Oklahoma camps. I think because there's like, a pride behind being from Oklahoma, you know, that I just find really endearing. So thank you for sharing your thoughts.

Ashley Sebree

Well, thank you for having those thoughts about us.

Brittany Mangelson

So Ashley, you said that there came a point in your life in your congregation where maybe you had started to be men toward a little bit more, and you were really encouraged to kind of live into your discipleship. Uh, can you tell us a little bit more about that? Like in what ways? Do you feel like you were mentor? Did you ever feel like you were a burden to your congregation or how did they get you involved?

Ashley Sebree

So as I mentioned earlier, growing up, my both of my grandparents were priesthood members. And my grandpa is a 70 he is really good friends with another 70 from the Del City congregation who actually happens to me, my best friend's father. So it's a little bit confusing, but basically my grandpa was really good friends with another 70 and the two of them would take myself and my friend. It's Shelby Bun Moses. They would take us with them on their 70 trips. Even when we were in middle school, we would go down to different cities, especially in the Native American communities, because my grandpa and my family were all Native American and we would be there and we would be present with them when they were providing ministry and when they were teaching people about the church. And so really, just from a young age, they just allowed us to be there and looking back that something that's so special to me because they always included us in the conversation. And Shelby and I used to joke because they were both seventies, that the two of us were both 30 fives and that we made up one 70. Um, so we always thought that was really funny. But even aside from my family just growing up in my congregation, I think that they always just really believed in every one of us, from the youngest of us to the oldest. And they always saw the potential in us to be whatever we wanted to be and to become the next leaders of the church. And in fact, they used to always say, You know, they would never say you were the future of the church. They would say you are the president of the church, and that always meant so much to me because it didn't matter what they asked us to do it just meant so much to me that they trusted us to do it. They would ask us to do the offer ring or to put together presentations, to come and talk about camps. At one point I have to laugh about this. At one point, they used to allow me and another young girl to sing, and I cannot sing to save my life. And so, looking back, the fact that they would asked us to do that just cracks me up. But they were still always so supportive and so really, as I just continue to grow in my age. Just those responsibilities just continued. So, aside from my family members from my grandpa, being such a mentor to me in my own congregation, there were so many people, you know, like I said, who really believed in me and who took the time to make sure

that I was having a good experience at church, but not only at church outside, in the community as well. My congregation growing up was always such a tight knit community. We would go and play games on Sunday nights at someone's house. There's a woman in my congregation named Sharon who used to take us to amusement parks and for water parks just to make sure that all of the youth in our congregation could be together. And we could all spend time together, not only on Sundays at church but outside of the church. And so there were just so many people who I wish I could name every single one of them who always took time to make sure that that we got to spend time together and grow together in the church as disciples in our spiritual journey. But then also, just as people together in the outside world. And so I'm so thankful for everyone in my congregation and in the Oakland, a mission center who wasn't in towards me growing up because there are so many of them. Um, you know, we're talking about the camping experience, and I never really learned a lot of life skills. I guess you could say, in my own home, I really learned a lot of them in camp. There were people at church camp that taught me how to fish. I learned how to drive a tractor, actually, at campgrounds. Um, not very far they didn't let me drive it too far. But I learned how to cook there. And so really, just each and every person and that took time with me, really help me to grow not only in my spiritual journey, but just in life in general. And so I'm really appreciative for that. And they never they never made me feel like I was a burden at all.

Brittany Mangelson

One thing Ashley that you said that I thought was really important to reiterate is that they made you feel not that you were the future of the church, but that you were the president of the church, which I think is really important to do when we're doing ministry with youth and young adults. Um, because it means that we accept them as they are right now that they don't need to grow or perfect anymore to fit in that they are the church right now at the state that they are in which I think is, um such like a low pressure way to go about encouraging involvement and engagement, because when you are told that you're the future of the church, there's just an added pressure there, and you know how do you change to evolve and develop into what the future church needs to be. But if we just accept the fact that kids and teenagers and young adults are the church were already the church. I think that that is a shift in perspective that isn't always talked about. And so I'm really glad that you brought it up.

Ashley Sebree

Yeah, I definitely always really felt like I was a valued member of the community. And what I could bring to the table as I was then, was important. And so, like you said, I think that that shift in thinking is really essential to growing as a community.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, I'm totally agreed. So, actually, as you were growing up continuing and you know, your teenagers young adulthood going to college, etcetera. How did your involvement in church change, or did it change or expand or change? Um, what did it look like? You know, as you were going off to school, Uh, were you encouraged to maybe only date or associate with people in the church? I mean, how was your relationship with the church? Will also just growing up in engaging in the outside world.

Ashley Sebree

Well, so I went to school here in Oklahoma. I didn't go off to Graceland in Iowa, so I stayed here. And so what really changed with church for me was just the commute. We don't have any congregations located in Norman anymore, which is where I went to school at the University of Oklahoma. And so it changed from me being able to drive, you know, 10 minutes to go to my congregation to about 25 to 30. And so as I grew older, I think I don't want this to come off the wrong way. I think that began to kind of way out whether or not I wanted to go to church because maybe I didn't necessarily see as much value in it as I did before. Um, and a lot of that kind of also factored into my experience at college. There were so many times when study groups were meeting on Sunday mornings or people were doing things that I really wanted to be a part of. And even though I grew up in Oklahoma, which is a very conservative area, when I was at school, there were a lot of people that church just wasn't on their radar. It wasn't something that they did. And so you know, when you explained to them Well, I have to go to church funds Any and I need to do this. And I need to do that because you are such a valued member of that community. A lot of them just didn't understand. And so as I got older, I think that I started to kind of fall into that they didn't really see the value in it. And so I think a lot of that kind of rubbed off on me, and so I didn't necessarily attend church as much as I would have liked. But in those early years in college, but as I continued on through college, I started to realize I started to regain that value and started to really miss the community. And every Sunday that I missed, I was just really bummed out because I genuinely loved and cared for those people so much. And so as I kind of got older, I started to really just regain that desire to be in community and to be in a place where I felt accepted and loved and genuinely enjoyed worshipping. And so during my my Super senior year, as I like to call it of college, I received a call to the priesthood, and so from then on, it really drastically shifted as I started to take priesthood classes and started thinking about the future and what I would bring with that new role to my car vision. Because during college I still continue to go to that same congregation. And so I just really started to think about how things would change and what type of ministries I could provide and just really tried to really rejuvenate my enthusiasm for the church and for growing in my own spiritually journey.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, it sounds like there was an intentionality that had to take place because he weren't necessarily just going out of convenience because it's, you know, the neighborhood church. It's where your friends are. But once you get on your own, it's a or the you know your parents or there's some sort of social pressure to go. But when you move and go up to college, the decision is on you, and you have to be intentional about it and take some ownership of it. So

Ashley Sebree

I think also. That kind of falls into between the ages of 18 to 21. At least in Oklahoma. I'm not sure how it is everywhere else. There's kind of ah gap in the ministries that are provided and the ministries that you yourself can provide. You know, we talked about how the camping experience is such an essential part of who the Oklahoma Mission Center is. And from 18 to 21 you're too old to go to camp. But you're too young to come back and help his staff. And so just recently, they really started to figure out what that age range can contribute to really keep

people, too, uh, to really keep people involved in to still feel that ownership and to still feel like they have a place in the church. And so I really think that during that time, I would like you said, I just kind of made the decision not to go, because I just I just didn't see the value in it or replace my value. And in other, um, another things or places.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, I think that that is a really good point to point out that gap where you can't go to campus, camper, But you can't go to campus a staff. And so if that's what's keeping you engage with the community, then, yeah, getting creative to figure out how you can keep young adults engaged is an important thing. D'oh! So I just must say that I'm glad that you stuck it out so well.

Ashley Sebree

Thank you, I am too.

Brittany Mangelson

So I'm I'm wondering that as you have moved through college and now you are involved with your mission centered leadership team, which I think is super awesome. I'm wondering how your experiences with the church and how you're meant toward how that has helped shape what you've wanted to do, you know, quote unquote when you grow up. And I definitely did it there, you know, Did have you felt like you were able to gain leadership skills or just like, communication or conflict resolution skills or just anything like that. These these, uh, principles and values that we talked about in church all the time. How have those translated to your everyday life is what I'm trying to say?

Ashley Sebree

Yeah, I definitely feel like I gained so much just growing up in this church for one thing. Public speaking is something that I definitely developed. I've always kind of been pretty outgoing, but when you get up to the pulpit and you look out and even if your congregation only has no 20 to 30 people, it's still really nerve racking, especially because people, you know, they engage with you. They make eye contact with you. They're really listening to what you have to say. And so growing up and taking on those leadership roles, I gained a lot of public speaking experience and so I really appreciate that, Um, but also I I guess I I don't want this to come off the wrong way, either. But I also kind of gain, um, spontaneity because a lot of times at my congregation, you know, someone wouldn't show up for something or they needed someone to do this. And so it was kind of just at the drop of a hat, he would be asked to do something, and so I really just learned how to adapt to different situations and that really carried with me through college and into the workplace. Now the job that I have today is very much you have to adapt to what's going on and sometimes things that you didn't plan for or didn't plan on doing takes priority. And so you have to do that. And so I really attribute that to growing up in the church and also really just being okay with failure. Because sometimes when you were asked to do something, you may not have done it the best that you could have or the best that you would have liked you. But, um, what I have noticed in community crisis, everyone is still so supportive of you, even if you do not the best job. You know, like I mentioned earlier when they used to ask

me in another girl, my congregation's they probably realized that it wasn't that great. I hope they did. But, you know, you're just you're just okay with failure because you know that you're in a loving and accepting community, no matter what. And so, you know, translating that into the world into the workforce. I just kind of learned that, you know, if they don't like it, that's okay. Because of the end of the day. I know who I am. I know whose I am. And, um I'm gonna be okay and then really kind of thinking about to the church and where I am today in my own job. It's so funny because we talk about how community of Christ is kind of a small church, but in a big way. And when I was going to school, there was a woman who worked at the university, um, who had connections. She did payroll, and so she actually helped me to get my first job at the university. It was very simple, she said, You know, you'll do your interview here and you'll likely get the job. And I did the interview and I got the job, and when I graduated college, I really couldn't find a job in my field. I graduated with a degree in meteorology, and I just couldn't seem to find a job at the time. And someone at church said, You know, I know you do meteorology, but here's an environmental job you could take, And I remember thinking, Okay, well, you all try that. And what's so funny about that is that's where I work now, and so with a lot of the jobs that I've had, um, after you after I graduated and why I was going through college. I made so many connections, I was given so many opportunities by church members that I'm really thankful for today too.

Brittany Mangelson

I love so many of the things that you said. It sounds like you're really, uh that confidence was really instilled in you growing up and being able to prepare a sermon or a homily or whatever it was that you were speaking from the pulpit to be able to deliver that in front of a group of people that, you know, you know, are supportive of you. Ah, and you know, are excited to hear what you have to say and to use your voice and that, you know, that's that's that's a pretty big deal. Um, something that I think that we don't necessarily give ourselves credit enough for that. We that we have so many opportunities for youth to really get involved and the benefit that that has. Sometimes I don't think that we recognize how special and how just unique over experience. That is for a lot of kids. So thank you for bringing that up. And, yes, it's always great to have a network of people who are there to support you and to, uh, you know, point you in the direction of a job or to be able to help you navigate the college system or employment systems. And yeah, it's good. Good stuff.

Ashley Sebree

Well, and I appreciate that. You know, you really put a word toe, everything that I was saying. You said confidence, and I didn't realize it, you know, when I was speaking, but that's really what they gave me. They gave me so much confidence, and my grandma would probably say they gave me a little too much confidence. Um, but I am really thankful for that. And like you said for those opportunities,

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah. So I feel like we're come answering this question in the moment right now, but I'm wondering if you recognise very specific benefits of religious communities in today's world. I mean, I know that a lot of millennials are walking away from institutional church, and they

more and more are finding themselves in the spiritual but not religious camp. And so I'm always curious to hear from people who are still engaged in congregational life. What keeps you there? What are the what do you see is the benefits of a religious community?

Ashley Sebree

Well it's like you said. I really do think that we've kind of been answering this as we've gone along so far. But aside from what we've talked about for me, really, just being in community is such a benefit, and especially being in a community that understands you really, at the deepest level. They understand who you are to your core, what your beliefs are, what your foundation is, what you stand for. I have so many wonderful relationships in my life. But when I think about the deepest relationships that I have, it's with people at church, because at church, while sometimes you know, we do hide the bad things that are going on in our lives were provided the opportunity to be our authentic selves. And people love you and support you no matter what. And so you, at least in my experience, I haven't really gotten that in different relationships. Sometimes you know, I'm not my wild and crazy sellable, for I'm not as outgoing or I'm not this or that, because I don't necessarily feel that that that core connection with people, um who maybe don't share that religious community experience with. And so really just the community itself is just such a benefit to me. And it's something that I feel like I can never say that I'm thankful enough for, because it's just it's so hard to explain, like the feeling of that community because it's it's almost a Ziff. You do have another family, the family that's been with you through so much and that you can talk to, and that's always there for you, always there for you. And so that's really what I think about.

Brittany Mangelson

I've thought a lot about that, too, because growing up where I assumed that I was in the one true church and that broke down and, um, I had really reevaluate what the purpose of churches and for me it continually comes down to community, and, like you said, it's the people who are together who know each other's core values. And yet we all lived those values out in different ways, so they're still diversity. There's still difference of belief and opinion, and I don't have to agree with everyone sitting next to me in the pew, but at the same time there are things that are so deeply part of who we are that tie us together and yeah, when I think of of the types of organizations that I want my family involved in, I just could not figure out a place better than this church. You know, just to be able to have a support group and just a community that would rear help me and rear my children in a direction of peace and reconciliation and and just like you said, all of our core values and principles.

Ashley Sebree

Well, like I said, I think it's so difficult to explain that to people who maybe aren't necessarily in that kind of community, you grow up in it because it's it's just so hard to put into words.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, I totally agree, and it's it's just it's interesting because I think a lot of people, maybe that was the general, a generalization. But I feel like a lot of people who are our age who have stepped away from institutionalized religion. What they're really stepping away from is just



dogmatic systems of believe. But I just so badly wish that people could understand that No, you can actually have a diverse community and you can actually have your voice heard. And you can have a say in how your church experience looks. It doesn't have to just be prescribed to you that you could be part of shaping it. So e I could go on and on about this, and this is not about my thoughts. So I am just thinking you because you just said a lot of things that I've been thinking about. So and I guess going on with that again. This is kind of in the same bane of questions, but what specifically keeps you active and involved with Community of Christ, today I'm particularly interested in maybe hearing a little bit more about your work with your mission center. Ah, and just what keeps you going? Because I know I'm in congregational leadership, and that could be very tiring at times. And so to bring that to the mission center level, I just wanted to say, like, girl, what are you doing? That's kind of the a lot of work. So I want to know what keeps you active and involved in doing that today.

Ashley Sebree

Well, I think really, it all comes down to feeling that sense of ownership with Community of Christ and for being provided those opportunities as a kid to where I did get confidence instilled in me and people didn't believe in me. I think that's really what keeps me active and involved and even within the mission center. Parker Johnson. Actually, as some of you may know, Park or Johnson really took off on communications with the Oklahoma Mission Center. He created our website. He created our mailing list, our social media accounts. I was just there with him, trying to help. And so when he left, he left that to me and again. He helped me to build my confidence and taught me everything that I needed to know. And what's what blows my mind even just when I think about it today is that that I am even allowed to do that? You know, I don't have any sort of background and communications or anything like that, but they trust me, and they let me do it. And there are so many different ways that we can all connect with one another and working at the mission center level with communications. I've seen that growing up, I didn't necessarily know where all the congregations in Oklahoma were. And as our social media presence has developed, so has that of our congregations. And so I'm connecting with different people in different congregations that I never even knew were existing in our mission center and even well outside of our mission center. We've received requests on Instagram from a couple of children in Brazil who were wanting to know more about the church and get in touch with ministers or apostles or whoever just to learn more about it. And so it's still kind of blows my mind to this day that, you know, I'm the one that's given the opportunity to even do that again, that I'm the one that's trusted with that power because it is such a big responsibility. But going back to what it kind of keeps me active and involved is just when you do make those connections and um, really, you just see other people get to experience this community and to become tied together. I guess maybe that's the That's the best way to put it. But to connect people who maybe didn't have the opportunity to be connected before really keeps me wanting to keep doing what I'm doing and giving people a voice to share their story based. Like I said, growing up, I didn't know about congregations, and some people still may not know them today. And so really getting to hear from our congregations that air in more rural areas, uh, stories about the things that they're doing in their own community and the ways that they have inspired others to do that as well. It just brings me joy, and I know that sounds really

cheesy, but I just really like, um, connecting everyone and just seeing all the wonderful work that they're doing, it just really gives me hope for the future.

Brittany Mangelson

Well, I'm right there with you. If you think that's cheesy, then I'm joining you with this chief party because I felt this. And I want to keep talking about social media a little bit more because, like I said, you have rocked it on Twitter and on Instagram and Facebook and your mailing list. I'm on your mailing list. I think it's really cool. So I I'm interested to know, um, just I guess your thoughts on online ministries in general and I know that you are also on the Community Space Leadership team, which is out of the Oklahoma Mission Center. But it expands well beyond the Oklahoma Mission Center. And I have been on multiple times, and there's people from all over the world that tune into community space regularly. And I think that was social media. We as a church are really, um, kind of on the cutting edge of a lot of what we are doing. What social media. I have not seen any other church really talk favorably about online communion, or maybe not favorably but productively with sacramental ministry online. And there's just a great, great debate in a lot of the Facebook groups that I'm in for social media people doing church stuff, um, about how how can we create communities online? And there's a lot of resistance. I think, too, that because people think of church just sitting in a pew and how we've always done it. And I just see community Christ really on the cutting edge and breaking down a lot of boundaries that used to be there and just we we've been rethinking church, and I think that community space has been a huge, huge part of that. So I I don't necessarily have a question for you, but I want to hear your thoughts. How has it been to be able to connect with people from all over the world, whether it be through Instagram, Twitter or community space? And how how do you think the Community of Christ should be responding to the enquiries that we're having online?

Ashley Sebree

Okay, No. And thank you. That's a really good question. But I really I really do see a benefit to online community. Community space is modeled after, um, community place, I believe. I hope you got that right out of the Kennedy East Mission Center. And so we kind of just copied what they did and changed it up just a little bit. But there is such a huge benefit to that. Not only you know there are people from Oklahoma that join our calls, but there are people outside of Oklahoma who joined our calls and who has kind of become a part of our little online community that we've made up. And some of the stories that we've heard from people who join is that they don't have a congregation near them. And so they can't go or they work on Sunday mornings and they just can't get out of it. Or maybe they don't feel comfortable being in a physical building. You know, sometimes because Community of Christ is so small, yet also so large, I feel like when there are visitors that come and we all just get so excited to see them that sometimes maybe we bombard them with the little too many questions or too much love. And it's a little intense at first for visitors. So online. You know, you you have the option to share if you want to share, or you can just be there and be present and listen and then, you know, eventually kind of work your way up to feeling comfortable enough to share. But also I really seen growth in people inviting friends. I know that's always kind of Ah ah, controversial thing. People are often hesitant to invite their friends because they can't really control the way

things go one way or the other. And so I think there's a little bit of fear and inviting your friends. But I've really seen a growth in inviting friends and family members, and we even have people who regularly attend and planned community space who aren't members of Community of Christ and one in particular. I've heard state time and time again. This is my church, and I'm so proud to be a part of it, you know, even though she's not even, you know, she's not a baptized member of Community Christ. She still feels welcoming and valued as being a part of that community. And so really, there are so many benefits to it. And another thing that we really seen is because Oklahoma's name is a cross community space. We've kind of gotten a resurgence of people who have left Oklahoma that have come back. We have people who used to be a part of our mission center that live in Hawaii, and so you know, any time that they can, you know there's a big time difference there, but anytime they can, they join. And so it's like I kind of like a little reunion whenever they get to come on. But I am also kind of old school, so I know that we've kind of moved towards having church online and having gatherings online. But I feel like there's also such a benefit to being physically present and being in a church building. Maybe not necessarily. Always sitting in the sanctuary may be changing it up and doing more of, like a coffee and conversation type of thing in a classroom or something like that. But I do see such value in being physically present with one another. And I think when we talk about moving forward with technology and community of Christ and these online gatherings, people are hesitant because I think a lot of them fear that these online communities are going to replace our physical congregations. And while I absolutely love technology, I always want people. No, no, that's not what we're doing or that's not what we're trying to do. We're just trying to bring people together who maybe wouldn't necessarily get to be together. Um, so the opportunities are just they're really insane when you think about it that you can Well, first off that you and I could just sit here and I can talk to you from Oklahoma while you're in Utah and, um, you know, we have people joined from Canada and from Maryland and just really all over in community space, and I'm I'm sure that's how it is with all of the online ministries that Community of Christ has. I've tried to join Australia's community plus before, but that time difference puts it at about 3 a.m. Here in Oklahoma, and I just never get up for it. And so one of these days I'm gonna join Australia's call. I know I am.

Brittany Mangelson

Uh, well, give me a call when you do in all hop on and swell. It will be in the middle of the night in Utah as well, but

Ashley Sebree

We'll have coffee! But But I really do see such a benefit in online ministries. And I really do think that it can change the way that we, um we grow and live in community.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, and I think it's interesting to hear you talk about how you don't necessarily think that online communities are gonna fully replace creation all life, and I feel the same way. And if anything, I would say the online communities in my experience have reinforced the need four meeting face to face. So I know the ones that I've been involved with. Um, there's one in my mission center and we have tried to have face to face gathering that missions in our conference

Or, you know, I was involved with several activities and things at World Conference knowing that there was gonna be a lot of people that had only gathered online. And then suddenly we're all gonna be together. And so, you know, we have a latter day secret reception, uh, just different activities that were really just focusing on getting these folks who had on Lee interacted online together, face to face. And I think that that's really, really important because as much as you know, I will defend online ministries until the day I die, which I die. Hopefully they will look very different than they do today. But I am a big, big proponent of them, and I've seen how they can be the gateway into congregational life or how they can be the gateway into healing and repairing relationships with God and and I I see them is very, very good. However, I do think that sometimes you just need somebody to sit next to you and to have them put your arm around you and to just say it's gonna be okay and and I think that online communities it's a good, um, it's good. It's a good step in the right direction when you don't have a physical community. To me, it's It doesn't replace a physical community, but it almost makes me. It gives me more motivation to make my physical community better and to be more invitational because I've seen what it does and in people's lives.

Ashley Sebree

Absolutely. And like you said, a heart emoji can only go so far. You know, a hug and a shoulder to cry on goes a lot further.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, so Ashley we've been talking a lot about the exciting things, hopes and just all that stuff. But I'm now wondering what you see as some of the challenges of being a young adults in Community of Christ. Ah, what have you come across that's just been challenging or frustrating is as you've lived out your discipleship as a young adult.

Ashley Sebree

I think some of the hardest things that I've kind of experience is being a young adult in the church is really being burnt out. I think a lot of times people see younger people, and I really don't even consider myself to be that young anymore. You know, I'm getting pretty close to 30 so I'm not feeling too young. But I think a lot of times people see younger people and just kind of give them tasks because they know that they are younger and a lot of times they think that they have more energy and they just give them tasks to do, which is great. If you're willing to do it, that's absolutely wonderful. But I think a lot of times younger people, in my experience are really needing their cup to be filled before they can go out and fill the cups of other people. And so I think that that's really one thing that's been hard, and I think that that's a thing that maybe has caused us to lose and people in between. You know that 18 to 25 age range is just feeling burnt out, and I think it another hard thing about being, you know, younger in the church. Is that people? I think a lot of people think that you have all of the answers to the church's problems. Like I said, I'm pushing 30 so I may not necessarily want to correct that I'm 28 so I'm not really quite pushing 30.

Brittany Mangelson

You're still young!

Ashley Sebree

Still young. I don't I don't want to put out the wrong message into the the Worldwide Church. But I think a lot of times they people think that you have all the answers and that I, as a 28 year old, can read the mind of an 18 year old and know what they want in the church. And we're also different. Like I said, I'm I'm kind of old school. I love physical congregations. I keep a, um, paper planner. You know, I'm I'm not necessarily. I don't necessarily do everything that people think that I'm using airports here. It millennials do. And so I think that that's also kind of been a challenge growing up in the church's people turn to you for the answers and, you know, you don't necessarily always have the answers. And so that's kind of a struggle, too. Is that your your looked at And people just expect a little bit, um, you're looked at and people really expect you to know everything, and you just you just don't like they dio. So I think that's a challenge.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, I can relate to that a little bit with Latter-day SeekerMinistry. I think that sometimes people they see something as successful or they see a group of young adults or a group of new converts and they get really excited and think. Okay, I'm gonna duplicate this in my area and do exactly what they're doing, and it's gonna work. And that's not always how it works. That's hardly ever actually how it works. And oh, yeah, I can I can totally see how that would be a being where, uh, Because you're excited and engaged in congregational life and I mean to use your word, You're pretty old school. I feel the same way. Although I cannot keep a paper planner. I've tried, and I failed at that. But, uh okay, so Ashley, I am now wondering. So we talked about the challengers of meaning of adult in the church. What do you see? Are the biggest challenges moving forward into the future? Just a church in general.

Ashley Sebree

One of the biggest challenges that I see moving former in the future is really trying to figure out ways to help those who have been wronged by the church. And when I say the church, you know, I mean Christianity in general, other denominations, In my own experience, there have been different youth or young adults or just people in general who have either been hurt by something that again air quotes of the church said or did that offended them and maybe, you know, made them feel like they weren't worthy moving forward. I think the challenge really is just trying to figure out a way to let them know that while someone may have wronged them or hurt them in the past and attributed whatever reason to Christianity or to the Bible or to the church's beliefs that they are worth and they're loved and that they are a valued member in the community and that they still have a place, I find myself really struggling with that in a community of Christ today with in my own experience, I mostly deal with young adults these days and really, that's who I've I've kind of seen this happen, too, and so I think that in the future we're all in perfect people, all people, all Christians, just everyone on this earth. We're not perfect And so I think that part of pushing through that challenge is really helping people to feel like they belong and maybe having a conversation or with them about why they chose to leave or why they felt like they were hurt and offering an apology that maybe that they didn't receive, um, on behalf of whoever hurt them, because it really breaks my heart. When I think about even my own friends in the church who have left because of something that was said or something that was done to them that doesn't align with community of Christ in during

principles mission initiatives believes and doesn't align with Christ mission. And so really, just pushing through that challenge, I think, is really gonna be a tough one, because not only do I see it in the church, I see it with my friends, who a lot of my friends don't attend church, and some of them don't attend because they were hurt. And so it's just so difficult to, um, you know, encourage them to become a part of a community that means so much when they've been hurt by either a similar community or by Christianity in the past. And so really, just trying to figure out again how to let them know that they're worthy and that their Justus important and just as needed as you are, is really gonna be a challenge because it is a challenge. Even today.

Brittany Mangelson

I agree with that 100% and I'm really glad that you brought that up, because I think that collectively we as a community, Community of Christ, when we think of challenges, we often I mean financial burdens are looming overhead. They've been looming over our heads since before my time with the church and for sure ever since. And I think there are multiple challenges and I think that so often we get bogged down by one or two of them. But what it comes down to for me is relationship and people. And if we solve some of these problems, or if we heal some of these problems, maybe other challenges that we face would work themselves out. And I think that I know that in my particular ministry there is a lot of hurt and a lot of distrust with religion and I can't fix it, and that's what's frustrating for me as I want, You know, like you said, how do we figure out a way to let people know that they're loved and to let people know that we aren't This is mean. You didn't necessarily say this, but you know, quote unquote, that kind of Christian, that we are a safe community and that even if some of our words, our scriptures are the same. But that doesn't mean that it's interpreted the same way. And it doesn't mean that our actions are going to be the same. And there's there's just a lot of trust that has to be built on and not like a bait and switch type of trust, like a genuine. We want you to know that you are loved and you are part of this community. I have found that sometimes just that hurt is just too great. And no matter what I do to try to convince someone that we're a safe community, it just it's it's not gonna work. And so I'm just really glad that you lifted that up, because that's something that I've been a reality that I've been struggling with lately, and, uh so I guess that you had validated some of my concerns because sometimes I think, you know, we get so focused on one or two issues and at the heart of it is still just broken relationships. And to me, that is the most devastating thing that a church can do is to be part of breaking up relationships,

Ashley Sebree

And I love that you use the word healing again. You keep finding all of the right words trying to describe. But healing is really what it's all about. And healing a deep emotional and spiritual hurt is challenging. And it's like you said, You know you want to fix it and you can continuously tell someone you matter. You're important, your loved. Here, God loves you, we love you and they may not necessarily get it just because of the drama and the pain that they've experienced in the past. And that's such a hard thing to deal with. Whenever you know, you just know they're worth and it's just you just can't explain that to them. And so it's really tough.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, it is. It is really tough, but I think that if long as we can name it and just go into ministry opportunities, knowing that even if we think we're all that and a bag of chips, that other person on the other side of the table or the pure that whatever you know, they they might be experiencing some riel trauma, uh, in the hands of a church. And so it's always important for members of a church who especially enthusiastic brother church to just be mindful of so thank you again for looking that up. And so, actually, I know that you are a speck staff. I think that was where I met you walking along at Graceland and was like, Oh, my gosh, there you are in person because we had seen each other online.

Ashley Sebree

Yes, and to be this maid come off is a little bit creepy. But I personally saw you and I don't know if I told you this before. I had never met at World Conference, but, um, I actually saw you a world conference and I went into Oh, it's the priest quorum. I'm not quite sure exactly what it's called. And you stood up and you were affirming someone's call. And I remember thinking, Oh my gosh, you know, that woman really has a testimony to share about. You know, whoever it was that you were for me, I could and quite remember. And for whatever reason, I remembered your face. And normally I don't remember people's faces. And then as you I started to become more familiar with you in the church and what you were doing, I was like,

Ashley Sebree

Oh, my gosh, that's the woman that I saw that stood up in the priest quorum um um, at World Conference. And so it's so funny. So the first time we actually met, yes, it was definitely It's Spec. And we kind of ran towards each other on the sidewalk and said, There you are. You're really a human being.

Brittany Mangelson

Well, this is hilarious. I Yes, it was the Priest caucus or the aaronic caucus.

Ashley Sebree

There we go.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, and we were going over the new council of 12 calls, and somebody has spoken. I think it was what I know. It was about Robin Linkhart, and somebody has spoken who I think have been in her mission center. And it was one of those moments where I was like, I've got to get up and say something. I've gotta get a sensation and So I just before I knew what I was at the mic and I was like, Hey, nobody knows me. But I'm new here. And I'm here because of Robin Linkhart. Just a moment where I was like, Oh, let me talk, please. Yep, it was very nerve-racking.

Ashley Sebree

Oh, that's what you did a great job, and I remember it so and not for a bad reason.

Brittany Mangelson

Ah, that's really, really funny. I'd kind of forgotten that that that that had happened. So Ah, but yes. So that is apparently the first time you recognized me or saw me. And then we yes, saw each other expect. And it was one of those things where it was like, I don't know, I just when you see people on zoom or on Facebook and little tiny screens are, you know, well, tiny squares. When you actually meet in real life, it kind of takes a second to, like, orient yourself of like who this person is. But it was like there you are. There's Ashley was all exciting.

Ashley Sebree

It's also kind of nerve racking because it's like, Oh, my gosh, I hope that they like the real life me and not just the zoom me.

Brittany Mangelson

I know in the real life means so awkward. So I think

Ashley Sebree

That's how I feel not about you, about myself. I feel I'm just like I don't know what to do. Do we hug? We never hugged online. We don't know.

Brittany Mangelson

Exactly well, eso all this buildup to ask you the question, since you are involved in Youth Ministry today, I am wondering if you have any thoughts on how to empower the youth of today into leadership roles and how to help them really have an understanding of who Community of Christ is. And just how do we become the mentors that you had as a kid?

Ashley Sebree

I think that's a great question. One of the things that comes to mind when I think about that, as whenever I was a kid, I was kind of just thrown into different things, like I said, singing or doing the offertory or doing this or doing that. And I was never super nervous about it just because of my outgoing personality. But ah, younger sister and I hope she's not mad at me for sharing this, but my younger sister is not the same way at all. She's very much involved with the church. He's a member, but we don't have the same strengths. And so you know, you asking her to get up and say a prayer is very difficult. She has social anxiety, and she gets nervous in front of crowds of people one on one. She's absolutely wonderful. And she'll she'll tell you, too, that she has public speaking anxiety or so social anxiety. But you put her in a room with children, and she isn't a wonderful teacher, A Sunday school teacher. She does all of our nursery events for them, for the mission center. She teaches the kids and they absolutely love her. And so I think that it really comes down to, um the best way to empower them is to play to their strengths and to ask them what they're interested in tow. Ask them what their gifts are, where they feel like they fit best into the congregation, whether that's helping plan, worship or teaching Sunday school or staying back in the nursery with the children. Um, I know that several years ago we took a spiritually gifts quiz at my congregation, and that really helped me to figure out what my spiritual gifts were, and I had never really thought about it in the past. But just seeing all the different ways that we can contribute to congregational life or to life in Community of Christ



was so interesting to me. So I really think that we need to be intentional with the way that we ask the youth to participate or to help. Because again, you know, one person may not feel comfortable sharing a prayer or doing the offertory. But they may feel comfortable leading announcements or doing this and that, and kind of just by throwing them into one thing, we could really be missing out on the ministry that they could provide if given the opportunity to provide in an area where they feel most comfortable. So I really think in order to empower them, we need to have a conversation with them and not just assume that because of how they act, um, outside of church or in whatever situation, that they would be good at this or that and really just see what they're interested in and see what their passions are, because I think that that could go a lot further than just throwing them into, um, something one way or the other.

Brittany Mangelson

I'm really glad that you said that. And I definitely know that that's true, because when we had reunion two years ago, the teachers had that the kid teachers had the children plan a worship service, and I was not one of the teachers at that particular reunion. But they plan a full worship service, and they had all the elements of a worship service. They had a little testimony. They had spiritual practice. They chose the songs, they did everything and they loved it. And so I was the director of Kids Camp the next summer, and for some of the older ones, you know, I was kind of soliciting. What would you like to do at camp, You know, like I want I want to make camp an experience that you would really like. What was your favorite thing to do at camp and worship? Planning was by far the number one thing that they wanted to do. And I was really surprised by that, because I guess I'd underestimated them. I mean, these are kids there, you know, under 12 years old and they really loved planning, worship. And so I had to figure out Okay, so we've got just a handful kids. So how do we plan where to do a worship and who's gonna be in the audience for the worship? So we brainstormed and we kind of had half the kids plan in the first half. The other half plan the second half and we had a full on worship service and the kids did everything. And it was amazing to see these, like five and six year olds just getting so enthusiastic about planning a worship service. And it's just like, man, I all I did. I mean, all I totally underestimated them, and I had no clue that that's what they were going to do. And I'm so glad that I asked the question because we were able to put on a great worship service. That was all about the enduring principles. And they told stories about how they've used the enduring principles in their lives. And, you know, here I am thinking that they would say, Like, we gotta play kickball or something. Yeah, they wanted to do something so serious and we spent an entire afternoon prepping for this worship service and the kids were engaged and they were excited. So all this to say yes, you know, get to know the youth and figure out what they are good at what they are interested in and then trust them that it'll work out because it was a really fun worship service. So yeah,

Ashley Sebree

It sounds like it. And it's funny that you say, you know, figure out what they're good at and trust them. I've got a quick little story. I normally I normally am sent to teach recreation whenever I do go to camp. And there was one day that I was helping out a junior camp and for recreation that day. They wanted us to play golf kind of in a pasture, and I know absolutely nothing about golf. But I said, You know what? I'm the recreation future. I'm We're gonna be fine. And they

sent me out into a pasture with a bunch of golf balls and hunters, and I don't know the difference, or I didn't know the difference of the time between putters and drivers. So we got out there and I had the kids. I'm hitting the golf balls as if they were hitting it with a driver, and every single one of the punters broke. And so they never asked me to get to the golfing class again. But again, it's I was really appreciative that they took the time to allow me to lead something that I felt comfortable in, and I guess I felt a little bit too comfortable in that setting. But that story just reminded me of that.

Brittany Mangelson

Well, I love it because again, like you said earlier, even though if you quote unquote fail, I thought we've quoted Unquoted a lot in this episode, Or at least I have. But I think

Ashley Sebree

I have too. I'm using them right now.

Brittany Mangelson

But if you fail, then you're still with the community that loves and supports you, and you just learn and trust yourselves that it'll work out better. Yeah, so I think I think that's a great story. Yeah, so actually, I know that you are now in your second year of seminary, so I'm just wondering. I mean, I don't really have any specific questions about that. Having been through seminary, I know that it's a lot of work. I know that it is a lot of fun that it is. It stretches you, it pushes you, challenges. You s So I'm just wondering what your thoughts are on the program, and I guess how it has helped shape and form your discipleship. And I guess maybe even your perception of the church.

Ashley Sebree

Yes. Yeah, seminary is definitely very difficult. But I chose to enter into the seminary portmanteau apply because when I became a priest, I think I always had this idea in my mind that once I became an adult, and once I became an ordained minister that I would know everything. You know, I would have this knowledge of the scriptures and I would have just the ability just to be an excellent minister. And so when I was ordained the next day, I remember thinking, All right, let's do this. You know, I know everything I need to know. And then as I started going out and trying to do these ministerial duties, I just didn't feel like I was enough for that. I knew anything and I just didn't feel prepared. Um, and so again, Parker Johnson encouraged me to apply for the seminary program. And so once I started, I realized I really didn't know as much as I thought I did. And so, from day one up until, you know, an hour ago when I was working on my homework, I'm just continuously learning things. And it's really it's really such an exciting experience, as as someone who didn't really feel like they knew that much when I turned in a paper or I do a discussion post and I get good feedback on it. I feel worthy and I feel like I belong and that I am no good enough in seminary or that I'm this and that. And so it's really just been such an interesting experience, because for a non seminary master's degree, I would assume that you know, you're learning in your growing, but it's, you know, in this specific area that isn't tied directly to your soul. So to say, I guess, and so being in seminary, it's just eye opening because your your theology is changing and your perception of

the church is changing in one way or the other and who Jesus was and who we can be today, just everything is just constantly changing and you're just continuously learning so much and just trying to process everything that I learned in seminary still a struggle in itself. But it's just like it changed who I am, and I feel like it's really given me the tools. Or at least I'm hoping by the time I graduate I'll have all the tools to go out into the world and to feel like I have the knowledge in the understanding to be able to be a better minister. We're in to reach out to those remaining to hear what I've learned and what I can share with them. And so I'm very grateful to be in the seminary program. I've met some. I'm just some awesome people and, you know, we meet at the temple two weeks out of the year in person. The seminary program is all in mine, and we get to meet each other face to face again after sharing, you know, in that virtual space, and you get to study in the temple library and you get to have ah worship together and eat together and again. You get to be a community, so it's so unique in my opinion, compared to in the court of Masters program, uh, graduate program, because again you are developing as a person and you're continuing your spiritual journey. But you're also doing so in a community and again just a religious community where people just get huge. Who? Your core. And so for me, it's just been a life changing experience, and I'm just I don't know, I just get so excited. Um, every time I start a new class, when am I gonna learn here? What am I gonna learn there? And so I'm really looking forward to taking all that information and going out into the world and just really feeling more prepared and feeling like I can be Ah, better minister in a better disciple of Christ.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, so many of the reasons that you stated for why you wanted to go to seminary, where my reasons as well and the program really I feel like afforded me the ability to just have just a little bit more confidence and also confidence. And knowing that I don't know as much as I thought I did or that I should or that I'm saying this weird.

Ashley Sebree

You make sense. I absolutely get it. I now know, too, that I didn't know everything because I don't know. I thought that, like I said, that it would come to me and I thought I knew all these things. And then in the program I'm like, Oh, so that's not what they meant in this passage. I was supposed to consider the context of it, you know, and what they meant to those people.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, I think that's the point is that we aren't going to arrive at some place of pure enlightenment where we just have all the answers. I mean, it's it's giving yourself permission to not know all the answers. And I think that that was something that I really had to figure out why I was in seminary, that I was kind of hoping that I would be able to tell the whole story of the church like the back of my hand right cable, like make all these big theological connections and just recognizing that the story of Christianity is so huge and it's so complex and it's constantly changing and then seeing where our little expression of Christianity comes into play with the larger picture and all the different ways to look at salvation and Jesus and just all these huge, huge concepts. It's like, Okay, this is liberating that I don't have to have, ah, theology. Just completely figured out and pin down. And like, this is it. And this is where I'm going to be for

the rest of my life, giving myself permission to continually ask questions, continually transition to continually evolves. Probably the biggest gift that seminary gave me. That's a pretty bold statement, actually, because seminary gave me a lot.

Ashley Sebree  
Right?

Brittany Mangelson

One of the things, one of them. So Yeah. Okay, so, Ashley, we are winding down. So I have one more question before my final. Is there anything else you'd like to leave us with? But my second to last question is just simply what gives you hope as we move forward together as a church?

Ashley Sebree

Uh, well, again, I don't want to sound really cheesy or sound like a brown noser, but people like you really give me hope as we move forward as a church, people who see a need and fill a need. There are so many different organizations and online communities that we've created because we've seen that there are needs and that there are different groups of people who really just need to come together and to be together to grow as a community. So I think about groups like community space. You know, I have to give a shout out again to community space, but community place for with community, all of the Latter-day sSeker ministry that you do and that the church does as well as harmony, harmony, excuse me. And all of the work that they've been doing to provide resource is an education about, you know, the LGBT experience in Christianity and in the church. And so as we move forward, I honestly and truly can say that it's just the people who continuously come back to the church and who are evolving and who are really doing their absolute best to reach out to those people on dust really ensure that everyone feels like they have a place and that they do belong in Community of Christ.

Brittany Mangelson

Well, this is a podcast, so people couldn't see my face when you said you Brittany. Cause I was like ohhhhhhhh, but I get what you're saying and I think that the enthusiasm that I see of all these different groups that are really calling for justice and calling for our identity to really shine through what we are doing. I mean, that's That's the church I fell in love with. It had nothing to do with, you know, being right or being big or being a rich church or anything like that. It was It was the people and it was the values that we stand for. So any time that I see organizations like all the ones you just named, um, and more that are just lobbying for that reconciliation and that peace and just making sure that all people know that they are loved, that's what gets me really excited. So I'm right there with your sister again in, like, the cheese best. Yeah, absolutely. So now wrapping up. I just always like to ask the people that I interview if there is anything else that you would like to leave us with. Is there something that you wanted to say that you didn't get a chance to order any final thoughts?

Ashley Sebree

I think I could go on and on and talk for hours and hours, and I don't think that anybody really wants to listen to that. So, um, I think the thing that I really want to just leave you with and

everyone with is just how important this church is to me, and I know that that's really kind of the theme that I've had when I've been sharing my stories, my experience growing up in this church. But this church has really absolutely shaped every aspect of my life and who I am. It's been stability in my life. It's helped me to grow as a person. I've been provided so many different opportunities because of Community of Christ. One thing I didn't mention, which I'll briefly just share that when I was in high school, we actually got to go on a 10 day church historic sites trip, and so that was really my first time to get to visit the northeastern part of the United States and go to Niagara Falls and the Kirtland Temple and, um so there's just so much that I could say about this church. But at the end of the day, it's just so important to me, and so I'm honestly, really just thankful for this community and for the people that have been there with me throughout the course of my life, my congregation in the Mission Center, the adults that have volunteered their time to mentor me and to just really teach me to be a better person and to be a better disciple. And again, it's just it's still hard to put into words, but Community of Christ is it's just my life. And so when I try and explain that to people who aren't ended it so challenging and it's so difficult. But I know I would not be who I am today or where I am today without this church. And so I could never say thank you enough to those who came before me and those who paved the path for me.

Brittany Mangelson

Ashley, I love all of that. Thank you so much. You have been on my list of people that I wanted to get on PZP for quite a while now, So I'm really glad that we finally were able to make this work. And I know that you are literally leaving tomorrow for your seminary focus section. So I'm really grateful that you snuck this in before you head out. And I wish you all the best and looking forward to seeing what the future holds for you. So thank you.

Ashley Sebree

Well, thank you so much for having me.

Josh Mangelson

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