

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 Project Zion Podcast. This is Brittany Mangelson and I will be your host for today's episode. And I am really, I don't know, excited doesn't necessarily seem like the right word, but just, um, joyful, I would say joyful about our guests today we have on Michael Wright. And we are going to be talking about his experience being in Rome right now. He is in Italy and Michael is the only member of Community of Christ in Italy. We did a Project Zion episode with him of several months ago about his faith transition story, so we will be sure to include that in the description of this episode. But Michael is currently quarantined in Italy. We are recording this on March 27th in 2020. We don't normally time stamp our episodes, but this feels like it's a little more relevant to do so. So we are going to have a check in with Michael. He has been posting a lot and keeping people updated on what's been happening and sharing stories of hope and love. And so we are, we're just gonna dive right on into it. So, Michael, before we get started, can you give us a check in. How are you doing? What's life like? Where you are at?

Michael Wright

Hi Brittany. Well, this is day 16 of locked down for us in Rome. So I'm sure many many of the listeners know the experiences that we're going through in Italy because we have been a real hot spot for this virus for the last couple of weeks. And the story of the Italian story of how we have managed and, um, gotten to the point where we are today is a dramatic one. It's a sad one. There are moans, moments of hope and peace within them. But we have been devastated. A lot of the the description that we're getting on the news and the way that people are kind of describing this is war. Like, you know, it's ah, everything is in motion, like we are at war. And the government continues to talk to us that we've not had a crisis like this in Italy since post World War II. and that are the rebuilding of our economy, and coming back into normal life will be very similar to that as well. So so it is a tense moment. It's a, it's been a difficult moment, A swell. So what is locked down mean for us here? I know a lot of places in the United States air starting to be locked down just like we are. Last evening I saw that the United States overtook us in numbers of actual cases. And I think this morning as of this morning, even China so United States seems to be in first place right now with the virus with the amount of cases in Italy, the lock down means that we can go to the grocery store. You have to have a government permit, which you just print online and fill out, to be able to go. You have to indicate one person in your family that's allowed to go to the grocery store. You can go to food outlets. Everyone knows the Italy's very has a very strong food tradition. So going to the butcher or the fruit vendor or the vegetable place those kinds of markets are okay as well, as long as the social distancing is happening and they're asking for everyone to be two meters. So about six feet away from each other. Supermarkets outside are handing out gloves to people. And also there are guards

outside to make sure that people are the six feet away that they're supposed to be. We could go to pharmacies. We can go to the hospitals, but we're not allowed to go to our general practitioner doctors, currently. That's that's not allowed in essential industries. Government workers, police, military firefighters, obviously the medical industry in supply chain for agriculture and food are still at work to be able to provide for the country. But that's about it. Schools have been out for multiple weeks, about almost for three weeks, and all of that went online learning or a home schooling, learning style or format. Uh, and, um, people are just working from home that can. We're all doing the best that we can with that. People that can work from home are doing this. They're calling this in Italian. They're calling smart working, and that is this, uh, work from home format for people and people that are in an industry that are not able to work from home where their employers can pay them. Then we have a lot of social systems here in Italy in place to be able to take care of people. So people first have to take their forced vacation time. All Italians have four weeks of vacation, um, which is a right to the worker in this country. So people are going to have to take that time first and people that run out of vacation time. Then there's a government system that is called the Casa Integrate Siona, which is the integration fund which will pay people 80% of their salaries just to stay home. So people are in pretty good shape right now with those kinds of things. We've got about 62,000 active cases in Italy right now. The good news is we've had nearly 11,000 people really recover from the disease. Also, half of those 62,000 active cases are people that have mild cases that are homes about 33,000. And but the tragic part is that we've had over 8000 deaths and and just yesterday alone, we had 700 plus deaths happening per day. So this is, this is a really difficult thing to watch what's happening. We see it on the news. We see the army trucks lined up for what seems for miles. Just full of caskets. Better going to the cemeteries in the north to cremate bodies. So this is has caused Italy to be, um really, uh ah. Country in warning my own personal, uh, routine of the day. I'm mostly up working from home. I'm in the seminary program, the Community of Christ Seminary Program. So I'm very busy with that as well. It's a very healthy distraction in a lot of ways. And then I get to go home, go out in the evening just before sunset. I take the dog out for a about an hour walk. If you have a dog in Italy, you're allowed to go out and walk the dog as long as you're keeping social distance from people. So I do that to clear my mind, to have a moment with I guess the greater creation be outside in my home for a little while. And in the evening, my husband, Antonio and I, we we cook together and spend the evening together. That's basically our routine. So it's not so bad for me and my family currently. But the anxieties that we have are for the more vulnerable populations. That's our extremely elderly population in Italy. We are where we are the longest living society on earth. We Italians are very well known for being very healthy, and a lot of that has to do with daily routine. And with our food, you know, our Mediterranean diet as well. So we have a very, very elderly population into this country. And then economic factors also have not made it really feasible for people to have lots of kids. So, you know, our medium age is I think it's 46 years old in this country, which is a lot older than a lot of countries. But, um, well, that's that. And that's the population, though, that we're losing. We're losing our elderly population that's here. Very few young people have been lost. Well, I think only two people under 40 have died in this whole entire time. And, um so this is this is really something that's affecting our elderly. And then, of course, it's affecting our medical, um, population to our doctors, our nurses are technicians, lots of them getting sick. And a lot of the doctors that

have come out of retirement to help because there's what have just not been enough medical force on the ground. You know, that's a real sad story of sacrifice because there's been many that have contracted the disease and have died when they were already retired from that, that industry and they were already in a vulnerable position. So, um, some outlets are saying that we have reached the peak as of this week, it's still to be seen. This is the first week that we have seen numbers drop. Now they haven't dropped consistently. Only two days this week did the numbers go down in contagious cases and in deaths, but they have spiked back up in the days in between. But still, it is a moment of hope for us because we have not seen any drop in nearly a three week period, three or four week period.

Brittany Mangelson

Wow, that was a lot. And I can speak for myself living in the States. I've been trying to keep plugged in with what is happening with Italy. They say that the US is just a couple of weeks behind Italy and I've listen to interviews of doctors who are really on the front lines of this, and it it's feels like we're living in another reality. Um, I did read an article that was saying that our collective feelings of discomfort and helplessness is a response to grief, and I think that that is what we as a society, are seeing at large. And a lot of that outside of Italy is that grief is for Italy. This virus has impacted people, obviously all over the world. But Italy has been in the forefront of people's minds because of how quickly the situation there has changed and how how devastating it was as soon as it started to become an issue, it just feels like overnight the entire world shifted. So thank you for sharing that. And I'm wondering, you know, as you are able to go outside a little bit in the evening, what is the what is the tone of the people that you're around or of the streets, and can you feel that grief in the air. I mean, is it what it what does it feel like to finally get out of your house in the evening, knowing the reasons why you're stuck inside?

Michael Wright

Well, I think maybe what I want I would like to start to say to that is that I think a lot of Americans have seen in social media or on the TV in the evening that Italians have been going to their balconies to sing together. Space is, uh is a real privilege in this country. We kind of live on top of each other in big apartment buildings in a city like Rome or Milan or in a very strange setups that he like Venice, which has water everywhere. You know, people live on top of each other. They, um there's not lots of extra space in the United States were more usedto having unless you live in New York City or maybe another giant metropolitan area. We're used to having houses that have a yard that have space between neighbors and, you know, maybe offense or something like that. That's just not the way that we live in Italy. And so people have been coming to to have contact with each other to their balconies and so that's been singing. People have been coming to the balconies toe have their lunch, which is such an important social event for Italians. So being able to to shout upto a balcony above or across and be able to have those experiences, I think that that's been a really beautiful coming together in a culture that's not used to distance. We just are, aren't used to it. We are, I think, in the United States that the personal space generally is about four feet between people and in Italy. That's half of that. We stand a much closer to each other. We're not used to being so far away from each other. We're a real tactile culture as well as we like to. We'd like to touch each other, hold onto

each other's arm. You make physical contact when you're communicating with people and most people probably know that we read each other not with a hug or a handshake, necessarily. But we kiss each other on the cheeks so distance is really complicated for Italians and we're not used to it and so I think that that has been very difficult. And I think people are feeling that distance in a way every evening at 6 p.m. Which is about the same time I go out with the dog. You hear people blaring music from their balconies. It usually starts with Italian national anthem. And then there will be nostalgic Italian music from the past, and you hear people singing and what not. You might see people come to the their balconies with a glass of wine or, you know, some with with Cem nibbles, we would call that a parrot evil Here, here in this in this culture toe once again share week each other in food and drink and company just for a few minutes before everyone retires back to whatever their family, businesses or their their jobs within their home. When I'm walking, I'm lucky because I live outside of the historic center of Rome. So we have a little bit more space here and a lot more green space, so I like to go and walk among the umbrella pines. If you're friends with me on social media, you will have seen the umbrella pines many times in poets They're one of my favorite things in nature here. And if you don't know what they are, there are a pine tree that are native to the Mediterranean area. They have a very, very long trunk that comes up almost into, ah, flowery top. If you kind of think about what a broccoli looks like in a tree form, that's what it would be very, very high. And they create this beautiful canopy, Uh, when there's many of them together. And I I I see lots of symbolism in those trees, and I like to be out about six o'clock because the sun starts to set. And with all of the chaos and the difficulty and the uncertainty that we are experiencing in this world right now, you see that nature around us is doing it same thing that it always does. It's consistent. The sun comes up of the clouds. Were there the trees air there, the wind is there, the sun will set, and we know it will happen again the very next day and is frenetic as the chaos of this all makes us. We see that that that nature is slow and that's been very healthy for me and inspiring for me. Um, I in very appreciative of those moments because, of course, we check in to see what's going on in the news, and I have two nations, Italy and the United States on checking and constantly with both of both nations news. But you have to be away from it a little bit, too, because it can become overwhelming a lot of ways. And I think, too, one of the the maybe the theological. There's many a theological thoughts and ideas that are going on. I think about the sacredness of creation from our enduring principles and think about it. I've been seeing in the news and in a lot of different places about how this isolation in lots of places in the world, but especially in Italy, as we've seen it, that that nature is changing, that the pollution has been gone from our air for like two weeks. And in the industrial north, there is no pollution in the air in the canals of Venice. It's probably been a century before dolphins and real fish have come back to the canals that air clear and clean, which they haven't been for decades. if not a century. Um, so we see I see that nature is working within itself. I mean, the viruses, nature and that virus is connected to us in being part of creation. But we see healing things happening at the same time within creation. And I think that cycle is super important for us to remember. And I think that cycle also helps us with, um, the idea of hope. And as we're coming up upon Easter to about resurrection in a lot of ways,

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah. Thank you for that, Michael. That was it feels in the midst of such devastation, it feels awkward to try to force us to talk about hope. So I guess I'm glad that you did it. You, in the midst of all this air, still able to stay grounded and centered and connected to something outside of your little apartment, your little home and you're able two to find those moments of hope and rebirth and resurrection. So thank you for that. And And I one thing when I I realized that I definitely wanted to get you on the project. Scion podcast is your social media posts love in the time of Corona virus. I think maybe the 1st 1 that you did was in mid March, maybe March 13th or so, But as you have seen your world starts to change, you started looking for moments where you saw love and hope. You've already shared some of you know, a lot of the content that they're in those posts. But are there any other stories that stand out? As you have just watched your world dramatically change right before your eyes? Where else have you been able to find hope?

Michael Wright

Well, first of all the the idea for "Love in the Time of Coronavirus" I liked the literary idea of using that idol from Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian writer's book, which is Love in the Time of Cholera. I wanted, I wanted to focus on love and also put messages of peace and, um, two people. But my posts on facebook, especially some of them have gone on Instagram as well. They had they have multiple layers to them. I needed people toe to know things about Italian culture that were relevant to what was happening here. Because cultural context is everything in meaning on how we interpret and understand what's happening in different locations. So I wanted to be able to help put forward, um, the the Italian mind, the Italian heart as I was writing these for mostly my American friends and family. I also wanted I wanted people to be able to feel hope in a real way and to feel peace in a time of uncertainty. But I didn't also want to hide the fact of the devastation that was happening as well, because I think we have to be honest about what's happening. But I wouldn't I would never consider myself to be a fear monger or a person that was trying to to get people agitated in any kind of way. That's that's just definitely not who I am as a person. But it was important, to be honest in my post as well. Um, and in a way, you know, waken talk a little bit about it later when we talk about online ministries or what not, But you know the scripture in Section 161 that says toe, lift up your eyes and fix them on the place beyond the horizon to which you are sent and I think that's one of the most impactful phrases from the Doctrine and Covenants about what it means to be prophetic as though we look up above. We're informed by the past and we look behind and we have to see Christ in the people in front of us in the present time. But we're asked toe look up and beyond the horizon. I think that's makes it prophetic. And I thought about people on the American shores looking out towards Italy and maybe China to learn about what was happening in our nation's because I think people might have thought that this was a Chinese problem. Unfortunately, the president continues to call this a China virus. But this is this is a world problem. It's not an Italian problem or challenge. This is biological. This is happening as part of of creation. So in a way I thought people looking towards us, it was maybe prophetic. We were in the future for them of what was going to start the happen in just a couple of weeks for them, and if they would believe what we were saying, perhaps devastation could be lower or people could learn from our own mistakes were our own joys were the way that we were

dealing with it in some kind of weight. So I felt a real call in some kind of way to inform people about what was happening. Um, there's been lots of moments of hope in the midst of the increasing death toll every day. That's the most problematic part for me is to see those high numbers of people better are valuable parts of our culture and our society. We're talking about the elderly. They're our collective memory. They are the people that help take care of kids here. We have a very different cultural value for the elderly. I would say in Italy, then sometimes in the United States, the elderly live with us in our homes. They helped to be part of the regular family. They cook because mostly both parents are working and they go to get the kids after school. Grand parents are part of an integral part of everyday life in Italy, and these are the people that we are losing. Um, they're so important to us here, and so those that's been very complicated, but There's been lots of moments of peace and of hope as well. And some of those moments have been from the Italian people themselves to see people coming together to help one another, to see famous people here like Giorgio Armani and you might sometimes see in the grocery store . He's the pasta king. You could probably use ravioli in the freezer section. Or sometimes, you know, in the people have been giving millions of euros to the hospitals in our country. Um, others. There's a very famous rapper in Italy. His name's Fedez and his wife is a instagram. Um um, what's that called a personal

Brittany Mangelson  
Influencer?

Michael Wright

They gave 4.5 1,000,000 euros to Ah hospital and totally outfitted a whole new I see you in the worst hit hospital in this country. That's beautiful. To see industry stepping up, Ferrari had to stop making cars with the ministerial decree. So Ferrari is now building ventilators for our hospital and Gucci of stood up and said, We can't continue to employ people in our factories to be able to do, uh, clothing. So we will make scrubs and we will make masks so people are standing up and coming forward to use their talents to be able to help the cause. We saw a lot of this in World War Two and World War One in our countries, but this is happening again here. We saw a Chinese delegation and a Cuban delegation come to Italy in these days to help give more doctors medical assistance and nurses. The Chinese have been in this before, so they brought their expertise to us and have been helping us toe understand better how to move forward. Of Pope Francis you might have seen in the news not only this week as community of Christ. We pray the Lord's prayer at the called to Pope Francis to join in the world as humanity to pray this week together we did it at the same time as Pope Francis did. But he also went on, uh, pilgrimage in the city of Rome last week. In this these beautiful but eerie photos and video that you might have seen on social media or on the television Pope Francis walked throughout the city of Rome Ah city of four million people and probably injustice. Many tourists and pilgrims all year round, walking in some of the most centrally located parts of the city, where on a normal day it would look maybe like Fifth Avenue, New York City. You know, shoppers and tourists and pilgrims and in Roman's doing there, everyday business in the city. And yet it was completely empty, and he went to two different locations that are really important to Romans. First of all, in the Catholic tradition, Pope Francis is the bishop of Rome. So he is. Rome has a very special relationship with the Holy Father because he he is theme bishop or the

ecclesiastical leader not only of the world, but special, especially for the city of Rome. So he visited two different sites. One was to ST Mary Major, which is one of the four major basilicas of Rome. It is the one that is dedicated to marry, and in it he went to pray at an icon called Salute Papa Lou. Papa Lee Romani, which is a translation from Latin, would be the Roman people's health, and this was an icon that helped to stop a plague in the year of 5 93 80 and from there he went down the very busy via del Corso, which is the main pilgrimage route and shopping route that goes from Piazza Venezia to Piazza del Popolo. That would be the People Square where pilgrimage has always started in the city of Rome, and he visited the Church of Sunlight, cello, of course, so of where, in 15 22 there was another plague in the city of Rome, and the pope at that time took the crucifix from that that church, on a multiple day journey over to the Vatican at ST Peter's, where it was attributed that on the day that that crucifix arrived at ST Peter's Basilica that the plague in Rome stopped in that year. So in that place, Pope Francis prayed for obviously the elderly, the sick. He prayed for medical professionals who are overworked and our stick as well. And he said the words that we should be united with Christ, um, and that we're never alone to remember that we're a single body of which he is the head, calling for unity under Christianity, which I thought was really beautiful, too. So those were some of the things that have been happening that signal hope, signal unity signal, and that's that's unity in humanity and also unity in a sort of of the faiths coming together as well to pray and to fight this battle together.

Brittany Mangelson

I could only imagine the sense of pride. I don't know if that is an appropriate word to describe it, but the Italians must have felt, as they saw the pope pilgrimage to all these different places that have significant historical meaning on spiritual meaning and cultural meaning. But to see ah, leader, who who is is a spiritual leader, you know, to see a leader who people look to four connection to the divine. They look to the pope for hope. They look to the pope for guidance and for reassurance, and Soto have a pilgrimage like that. I can only imagine how meaningful that would be for the Italian people.

Michael Wright

It was really hopeful, because in these streets that were completely empty and bare, you have the Holy Father walking down these streets to go to these holy the sacred places. And he's completely dressed in his white cast, sick so hope that humanity can return to the streets and there is a riel symbol in in that castle, too, Like you were saying that he is a religious leader and a spiritual figure for the world. But also this this kind of moment of purity or off of healing that comes with that symbol of white clothing. I found that those images were we're very hopeful.

Brittany Mangelson

For sure. And I don't know if I've seen many pictures of that in the news. So now I'm gonna go look it up after this.

Michael Wright

Yeah, do.

Brittany Mangelson

So, Michael, we mentioned that you were the only member at this point in Italy a member of Community of Christ in Italy. And you mentioned online gatherings, online ministries. And so I want to dive into that and hear how you've been able to stay connected. Find out because we have these guidelines for sacraments in online settings. I'd like you to talk a little bit about that. And just how you've been able to stay connected to your church family in this time of isolation.

Michael Wright

Well, maybe what I would like to start off with talking about online ministries are brainy is that this week was my one year anniversary of being baptized in community of Christ.

Brittany Mangelson

Oh, yes. That is a perfect place to start.

Michael Wright

Yeah, so March 25th. So just two days ago, go, I celebrated one year, as in renewing my discipleship with this faith community. And because Project Zion is, ah, focused on a lot of waste a latter day seekers. Um, if you didn't hear my interview from before, I come from the latter day Saints tradition on grew up in that tradition my whole entire life. And, um, there were there were many things in my life that had me conflicted with the former tradition and in so many ways, I felt so guided to this place. But as you can imagine, Brittany And as we've talked about in in my former interview as well, it's odd that the spirit is present and calls me to this community where there is no one that's part of this community. It's my country, you know, in a lot of ways that I kept thinking. Okay, well, so how does this work? You know it at the 1st 1 I was seeking in Community of Christ and trying to figure out how might this work for my life. And I thought, Well, I'm just really excited to connect with the community that's here in Italy, only to find out that there was there was no community in Italy. And so, um, early in that seeking process, when I was connected with European leaders, a possible Richard James, uh, reached out to me. He's the possible over the Eurasia area, and he is based in Wales. And he reached out to me and told me about Community Circle, which was a brand new, um, online congregational experiment, four Western Europe, English language. And he invited me to attend. And so, of course I said I would come. But I thought to myself in so many ways, what is this going to be like in having worshipped in the Latter-day Saint, LDS format for for for my whole entire life, which is so prescriptive in what is allowed and what's not allowed? I just thought, Is this even going to be a real experience? Can the spirit reach out in such a way that we could communicate and be together in an online format and in reach, enrich each other's lives? And then, of course, there there comes the question about the the ordinances or the sacraments is we call them in Community of Christ that how would we take the sacrament or the Lord suffer? Or the Eucharist together as a community and so forth and so on and so forth. So I tended by that first time and I was blown away. I couldn't believe how much spirit was present and how life changing and transformative I thought that could be. And I've shared this multiple times, Brittany. But in a lot of ways to it. In a in a world where the divine is so difficult to describe and sometimes so difficult to comprehend, the Internet and the online community helps me, I think, understand the Holy Spirit even better, because we could be connected. I can



see you on my screen. We could be talking live. You could be feeling the spirit. I could be feeling the spirit. You're in Utah. I'm here in Rome, You know, we are all over the European continent. We have somebody that joins us from New Zealand and we're all feeling the same spirit. And we're all all being impressed upon by the same spirit, all being prepared by the same spirit and we're connected in a way that is seems so riel. But yet that person, those persons or people, are not present with me in place. Um, inside, I think about that ability for the spirit to be present in all the world and be preparing in all the world at the same time and be influencing, you know, seven billion people on the planet. It's it's difficult to understand, but in the online format it is, um it is a inability or a metaphor for us tow to kind of comprehend better what that might be like. Um, the online community has become a real lifeline for me. I wouldn't have an opportunity to worship really with anybody in Community of Christ in this country if it wasn't for Community Circle, where I I worship, and the people within that group have become so dear to me, and we've had to figure out how we can physically see each other, too. So World Conference was a wonderful way for so many of us to connect for the for the very first time. I remember running to them when I saw them and embracing them, and it was a long hug. that was needed because the physical is one part of the online experience of worship that we lack. And then we also had a retreat in Rome in October that people could come together and be physically together. But in this moment, in time when we can't physically be with each other of geographically but also in a moment in the historical moment in the world where things have changed so quickly for us and where physical contact could actually be harmful, it just shows to me the the prophetic nature of being online. Sure, the church has had financial limitations, and young people are not wanting to be in church buildings anymore. Some congregations can't afford to have church buildings anymore. We can constantly are being called to find new ways of being the body of Christ together as well, and this is one of those ways that it has developed. And I'm not saying that we foresaw the Corona virus as we looked as a people beyond the horizon. But this is one of those moments where we see that we're are in place for such a thing. A couple of weeks ago, I just happened to to click in online on a friend who is in England, Ken in Episcopalian. I'm sorry in Washington, D. C. And they were trying to have a prayer service, and they were so proud of themselves for a prayer service online. And I just kept thinking, We've been at this for a long time and we've been able to adapt to such a thing. And I was happy for that community. They were finding and learning in this moment of trial as well. And I know a lot of other communities are scrambling to be able to figure out how to connect more virtually in a moment when distance is called for with regard to the sacraments. Um, in that World Conference in April, there was a lot of discussion about the possibility of having the Lord suffer in an online format in a virtual format. And, um, I would say that those conversations were very positive. Move forward. I think a lot of people that are not used to not having a place to worship or being separated geographically or another way was difficult for them to understand why that would even be needed. And that's for sure. I mean, if you go to a Community of Christ church building every week and you are with the Saints, well, that there's not really a need for that at that time. But for people like myself, where were connected in the online format? Um, not having access to the Lord's Supper or even other sacraments is a riel. It's a real disadvantage for us, because that is a beautiful part of not only renewing baptismal covenants but also of sharing together in the body of Christ as a community in renewing each other together. In fact, in a lot of little for a long time ah, lot of our prayers and our ways. Speaking

about that on communion Sunday in the our own online community community circle, we would often talk about it in the form of a fast because, um, you know, are our community of Christ. Folks on here will understand what fasting is, but LDS people will definitely understand what that means, because we fast in that tradition every first Sunday of the month and every first Sunday of the month and community crisis when we take the Lord's Supper or the sacrament. And it was then that we were not able to do that so well. What is fasting? It's not being able to take part in eating and drinking, and that's what we were doing. We were not able to, particularly in the emblems of bread and wine or water. So when that in November of 2019 the first presidency gave instructions and the possibility to move toe online format for Communion, uh, that was broken, our fast was broken and we were able to have that experience and bringing. The first time that that happened for me was an amazing experience. I was online with my little community. I had actually missed the Sunday service when they first did it because I was traveling for work. But in that week they called everyone together to be able to provide that ministry to me. Then we joined together in testimony and in song, and we took communion together, and it was an amazing moment. You know, these first of going to church online for the first time. You know there's apprehension and in a little bit of being skeptical and the same thing with the Lord's Supper in the first format to I was skeptical. What would that be like? And, you know, to serve myself the bread and to take, um, the wine or the water on my own in front of my computer screen. And I have to say that the spirit was president was an amazing, beautiful moment for sure.

Brittany Mangelson

Thank you so much for that. I remember the first time that I participated in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper over the Internet, and I, too, was a little apprehensive about it. And I will admit that I felt a little awkward even in the actual event. Ah, but very, very quickly realizing that the people on the other end of the screens we might all be staring at each other while we are partaking. But we are all connected. And that there was There was something that's hard to describe that took place because we had been sharing stories and creating this community for a couple of years. I'm thinking our little online ministry for latter day seekers and and yet we were able to come together in this moment, sometimes in a way that sometimes the sacrament has been kept from people and yet in Community of Christ. It is open to all. And so we have taken an expanded that to even reach more people in new and inventive ways. And so I really appreciate hearing your perspective on it, because I think that there still is a little bit of apprehension, even within Community Christ, just because a lot of people haven't experienced church online more have in the last couple of weeks. But But prior to this, I feel like there was still a lot of just what is this going toe look like? Because I would say, as you were describing Italians and the culture of touching and of being close to each other physically, I would say that Community of Christ, at least in the U. S. I've experienced that, too. There's a lot of hugging. There's a lot of touching of shoulders. There's a lot of gathering in close knit circles in just the physical touch is very important to Community of Christ people and even the way we serve communion. It's a very personal thing where we, the minister, passes and serves, Um, they don't test. The minister serves each individual person, and there's there's a very tactile connection that happens. And so trying to imagine communion in an online setting, I think, has been difficult and and, yeah, a little bit awkward. It can be awkward, but when you take a step

back, or when I took a step back and realized that this was still providing that deep, deep connection to each other and to the divine and that together we were sitting down for this meal where all are welcome and all are worthy and there's nothing that you can do to change that the theology and the welcome and the invitation is just as real and the connection is just as real. So I just want to thank you for us, you know, affirming my experience as well.

Michael Wright

And well absolutely it is. And there's not a lot of churches that have, Ah, whole bunch of different sacraments, you know, the Catholic Church does. There might be a couple of other Christian denominations that have a number of sacraments, but we're pretty unique. We have eight sacraments in Community of Christ, and all of the sacraments of blessing have a physical tactile portion to them. They are there is a laying on of hands Um, And there there that could be all kinds of different forms to priesthood members actually laying hands on heads, people encircling in in prayer of person. I've seen pictures of people with their hands on the person as prayer has been given to them. So as you describe this, um, this important physical presence and Community of Christ and that's what community really kind of is, You know, our sacraments are a way for us to be able to to show those that in symbol, that tactile nature in symbol which can create this difficulty in understanding in a world that physical touch is not possible but understanding the the importance of the sacrament itself and what it gives. It helps us to understand that when possible, yes, of course, we should be performing the sacrament in the traditional way, but we have to be able to give each other some some flexibility there. This last week, Britney the first presidency gave instructions about how temporarily the sacrament of the laying on of hands could be done in a different format like we're talking about here. Social distancing is the That's the name of the game. This thing this month, you know, and probably will be for a couple of months more. And so in a moment when physical contact could, it could could potentially harm another person. Of course, that means we can't be really legalistic in the way that we are thinking and performing our ministry, because the ministry is there to bless. And, um, as those guidelines came out this week about how you could do that in the same room as a person without physically touching them, we're over the phone or in an online format. Um, it sparked a little bit of conversation in my theology class that is going on right now in Community of Christ Seminary and Professor Tony Chvala-Smith, who is our current instructor, had just put out there that this was a way for us to be able to see what was happening in the history of of the movement of theology, in our in our in our faith tradition and showing how we can stay faithful and be credible at the same time when it comes to theology and our our ministry a swell. So I think this is a perfect example. And this week Britney, we had a communion service that was not on Sunday. It was just needed. And sometimes I think in the virtual world we actually have a little bit more flexibility. Not everybody has to show up at a building. So if somebody needs something, we can show up in just a few minutes by clicking a couple of buttons that could be in our office at work. It could be here at home. Could be almost anywhere. We could be in the car with our phone, you know, And we showed up to have a communion service. And they're one of our dear dear sisters in our community who is ill. Multiple people are ill in our community right now, And she asked for that sacrament. And so I got to see a witness at this week in in place that she was able to receive the laying on of hands as per se we would call it with no laying on of hands in this

beautiful special blessing was given by by a possible Richard James for this individual. And it was a powerful, beautiful moment. And we took the time after he was done with the blessing for each of us to say a prayer for her. And so it was just once again. It was one of those moments that transcended the distance, which makes this Ah, beautiful moment. And I do realize that this sacrament is just been given to us in a temporary moment when needed. But at least it shows that in Community of Christ that we're willing to go and do what the what the what the Lord asks us to do. And that is to bless and heal and to bring comfort and peace to to all of God's creation.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, I'm reminded, Um, I was watching, I was participating in a presentation that Apostle Robin Linkhart gave at one point. I think I was in Nauvoo when I heard her talk about this. But when you imagine a denomination is a big is a ship, um, there some little rowboats. There are big massive yachts or cruise ships and trying to steer different ships takes takes different amounts of time, energy. It's easier to steer a smaller ship. And and this time, no, maybe paraphrasing. And maybe this isn't a true reflection of what she was saying, but Community of Christ is a is maybe a medium sized ship where we have some of the strengths of a smaller ship. We can turn easier. We can be more flexible than this massive yacht that has a lot of administrative red tape. I think that because of our size and because of our prophetic impulse and are common understanding that God is still speaking and that we have the creative flexibility to figure out how to best steer our ship and because we don't have to go through a 1,000,000 different points of administration and levels of administration and red tape, and we're not working to make sure that everything is fitting into a creed, et cetera were able to have that flexibility. And I think that in this situation with coronavirus, we have really seen that model that analogy come toe life. We've been able to see the first presidency react and respond very quickly, recognizing a very specific need and saying our ship needs to steer towards liberating this sacrament in this moment, and we're okay with that. We we don't hold so tightly to our traditions and so tightly to how things have always been to think that we can't do things differently. We're unimaginative group, and because of our size and because of our theology and understanding of continuing revelation and God's still speaking, it puts us in a very, very good position to be able to adapt and to be able to steer in a direction that is going to be beneficial while upholding our basic beliefs and who we are. Ah, and our identity and our dedication to Christ mission. So as you were talking about that, it just kind of reminded me of that analogy and and, ah, again the understanding that Community of Christ has been doing online ministries for a while now for several years, and truthfully, other denominations have looked to community of Christ for direction on how to do this. I know I have been contacted by friends in other denominations who are trying to figure out how to still have the Eucharist for there, congregation or two. Still, what is the best way to do a centering prayer online or any of these things that we normally find so much groundedness and comfort in people are having to re imagine what those Kenly look like And Community of Christ has actually been, Ah, good point of reference for people as they themselves air navigating this online ministry for the first time. So it's good to be a medium sized ship. I guess

Michael Wright

It is. And we've seen we've seen a lot in the last. Um, you know, in the last 10 years, we've seen a lot of our sacraments, um, adjusted. And for this reason, not only the online format, which is so new for for us. But we have been See, we've been called and challenged as a Christ centered tradition to offer those sacraments not only to members of the church, but to all peoples as ministry. And so, in order for that to happen, we've seen a lot of adjustment in in the formats of our our sacraments, which have become loosened in a way so that we could bless more people. And so this just she goes in that whole evolution that we're seeing with the sacraments, that providing them in these new in these new formats continues t give opportunity for us to be able to bless people's lives. And you talked about liberating the sacrament. But by liberating the sacrament, we are liberating people. They're they're being blessed and touched by my God.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, I think that's important to point out, because the sacraments are about people. They're about Greece. They're about connecting people to God. They're not about the sacrament themselves. We don't worship the sacrament. The sacraments point us to the god we worship, and they connect the people to the God we worship. And so I'm really glad that you pointed that out. Because I think that sometimes we can lose sight in the mechanics or in the tradition, or in deciding who is worthy or who is deserving or who has the right theology to participate or whatever it may be. And from my understanding, the whole point of the sacrament is to dismantle those walls of separation between humanity and God. And so, by liberating sacraments, we are liberating people. And we are being able to more directly connect people to God to God's love. And so, yeah, Thank you. Thank you for that. Yeah. So, Michael, I know that there is a lot of uncertainty in the world right now. And before we started recording, we were talking about how in Italy right now, you simply don't know what the end of this is going to look like. There's not a time frame that you can follow with confidence, because we have never been in this situation before. And so I guess I I guess I want you to speak to that uncertainty a little bit and how that feels. And then how how we can continue to find hope in the midst of so much uncertainty. Because I think that if we have an exact idea of how this was all going to end or when it was going to end, if there was a clear, definitive finish line than it might be easier for us to toe wade through these choppy waters. And yet there is no finish line that we can see at this point. So what are your thoughts on that on maintaining hope in the midst of so much uncertainty?

Michael Wright

Well, there is a lot of uncertainty were, but like I was saying before the majority, the majority of the anxiety that I'm feeling are for other people that are not in the same circumstances that I am. So I think about the medics and the nurses. And, you know, these people that are getting sick, the elderly that are dying, these are these are things that cause me a lot of anxiety. Also, the growing issue of the virus in the United States has me anxious to because many of my loved ones are in the United States. And so I'm worried about them. I have two parents that are are elderly and that have immune issues. And so, of course, I am uncertain and, um, and upset by those circumstances in the world. Other people are upset because they've lost their jobs where they might have been laid off. Their people might be scared because they don't really have stable shelter. Maybe being inside is is dangerous to some people that have abuse in their

families, or why not? So I do understand that there's a lot of uncertainty with people and that this is stressful to to to all kinds of people. And I can. Those are only the things that I've been able to imagine in my mind. I know that my own privilege removes me from being able to think of all the circumstances that are out there that that are causing other anxieties to people. But one of the things that I think is is hopeful is that there are people that have gone through this before us. Not in the history of time. Maybe, but they're our nation's going through this. So what are we doing in Italy? We're looking towards China and working with China as partners and collaborating. And so the United States. We was my hope from the beginning that people would see what was happening here, to be able to learn from it and not to think that it was a foreign problem in some kind of way. But as we become better and we're healing, which will most likely happen before it happens for you because you're behind us in this whole process, I hope people will look to us for hope in Italy. Um, And then, if there are places that started blood behind your states, I hope that they might be able to look at China and Italy and the United States once again. This is a problem of humanity. It has nothing to do with national borders at all. So I think that that could be hopeful that people can look and be on the horizon, the literal horizon out towards the sea, out towards where their lands are that are learning. And we're so lucky to live in a technological world where we connect, can connect and understand almost instantly what's happening in the rest of the world. And then another way. Think about the things that have changed in your life that are positive because of slowing down and being isolated for a little while. I was just talking with Antonio. We've been cooking every evening together, and I would have to say that we don't cook very often at all. We get take out, we go out lots of times for work. We have work dinners and things like that. So we're really enjoying that. And we have eaten such a variety of of foods that have been experimental, and we've just really, really enjoyed being together conversations, watching new series on Netflix or whatever. These have been wonderful experiences. Slowing down means that I'm not on the road all the time like I normally am with my job. So I'm getting to spend more time with the people that I love, get to have more walks with my dog and to be quieter in in in nature and maybe even just because I work in my own home right now. And many of you probably are, too. To be able to get up in the morning and to pray or to meditate or have some kind of spiritual practice that happens, is part of getting ready for your day. You don't have traffic ahead of you anymore, so you can spend your traffic time in a place to be able to help reduce anxiety. And I already mentioned the fact of our environment on and how the mother Nature is just grasp, gasping for air constantly. And she's getting some some fresh air, which is is needed for the environment. So I have No, I have not driven my car and 16 days. Not only is that a savings in gasoline money for me, and but, um, I just think about all the cars that are off the streets and are there more times when we could not have to hop in the car and go somewhere, could we learn from me the environmental justice that's happening in a time when other injustices are happening? at the same time, and I think that's just life. There's justice and injustice at the same time, and they we learn from from both of those. It's just the complicated part of being human. But I think that there are beautiful, wonderful things that are hopeful and peaceful and humanity, and at the same time there's the opposite humanity. But I think if we focus on those other loving things, it changes everything. In Italy, we don't really interact too much with our neighbors. It's a it's just a cultural thing. Interactive neighbors or just kind of scene is pretty nosy. And yet, at the other day I was working on my front porch in, and I know both of my

neighbors on both sides. But I heard my name Michael, my cola and I looked around and didn't see anybody, and I saw this hand with a pie reaching up above the wall that separates our two homes, and it was my neighbor who who made us up. I just said that we're thinking about you and we're here if you need us and I exchange the same sentiment, so so there are peaceful and hopeful things. Therefore, us. Uh and I think that if we can focus on those things, we might be able to change our future life. I've been in Italy for 20 years. In my 20 years of being here is bookmarked between two tragic events. I arrived in Italy two weeks after two weeks. I'm sorry before September 11th and I was in the beginning of my first orientation with my students, it abroad in the moment when September 11th happened and I was a moment that changed life forever. Everything's different now because of September 11th and then it was on September the 10. And I think that we'll see a lot of that in this world. Now, after this pandemic, I think things will start to change for us and they'll have to they'll be necessary. But I think a lot of those things could be positive for us and for humanity.

Brittany Mangelson

Yeah, I think that it is significant that your time in Italy has been encapsulated by these two and bet events. And I do hope that on the other end of this that we are a better people, that we don't take each other for granted that we I mean, I certainly hope that the political climate in the U. S. Shifts it softens. I hope that we are more understanding and more patient with each other, that we are less individualistic in our priorities, that we we understand that in other's welfare resides our own welfare short and that we are connected to each other. And so that's that's my hope, I guess. Like for me, that's what is is pushing me to. The other end of this is the my deep, deep hope that we will be a better people,

Michael Wright

People, I just if I could just finish too. There's been a lot of discussion between our politicians all over the world about the connection between politics and believing science, and I think also that just brings us back to. Maybe we will become more sensitive to creation around us and understand our connectivity to it, because we have to believe in science because we're part of science, you know, I think that that's also one of the things that we have to really figure out as a people to not not I'm not talking about Community of Christ. I'm talking about us humanity that we We have to understand that the the dire situation that's happening in the world with, um with regard to our our environment and our waters and our lands and our air, it's it's all connected and we're seeing that happen here. People that resist to not want to believe what's happening in other places and now it's starting to happen there. I think that there has been no, I hope that there will be finally a connection for everyone, no matter where they sit. In the political realm that we are connected to the greater creation and we have. You're really responsibility is humanity to take care of it, not only for creation sake but also for our future generations.

Brittany Mangelson

So, Michael, one thing that has also been a current event in the midst of all of this is that world church leadership has been doing the prayer for peace, live on Facebook and Community of Christ. We have a strong tradition of doing the daily prayer for peace and that is now being

done in people's homes because we can no longer gather at the temple and World Church leadership has been doing it on Facebook and live streaming it for everyone. And last week, a puzzle. Janne' Grover and her husband, Kevin, uh, said the prayers from their homes, and I was delighted when they announced that the prayer was written by Michael Wright, who was in Italy. And so I I would invite you to read that prayer and then, uh, would share any thoughts that you have about that prayer and then leave it with us as our closing wrap up.

Michael Wright

Well, in my in community connection, I serve in the leadership team, and one of the ways that I was asked to provide ministry was by prayer and prayer. For me, coming from the LDS tradition was always frowned upon when it was in a written form. And when I came to Community of Christ, I found myself very, um, not very confident in praying out loud, and there was a couple of reasons for that. But one of the main reasons was because I was learning about inclusive language in prayer, and I was really clumsy with it that I always felt like I was such a great prayer, my lvs format before. But as I was trying to be sensitive to the language that we were asked to adapt to when we prayed and used terms of for a divinity or those kinds of things. It was really clumsy for me at first, and although in my private prayers by myself at night or in the morning, I could read turned to some of the language of how I was connecting with God on didn't feel like I had to be so protective of the community around me and in the words that they heard me say so. What I started to do was I started to write prayer as a spiritual practice, and, um, I I did that to be able to practice what language which I really love, and I really love to right and so that I could participate in some kind of meaningful way. In my congregation, people keep talking in Community Christ about what your ministry is, and I often still ask myself, I don't have any idea what that is. But in some way I've been able to, um, provide comfort in peace with my prayers for peace that I write for my community and they've been shared in other formats in other communities as well. So as this was all coming together and we were all going down into a locked down in Europe, I decided that I needed to write a prayer for peace for this moment. And so I did. And I was really surprised to see Janne' read that this week. I was I was. I was really honored by that to know that my words have value and even is even though that I'm the author, in those first days after I wrote it, I had to pray at myself multiple times to calm my anxieties. So I leave this with our listeners today as a as a sign of peace to you, and I hope that these words can be comforting to you. So let us pray.

Michael Wright

God of shalom, help us as we go in peace this week. Peace in isolation, a simpler way of life. Peace to our neighbors behind closed doors protect them from strife. Peace to those hospitalized as breathe can be difficult to find. Peace to those who hell who make decisions about other's lives. Peace to those with little access to healthcare with no insurance, no wealth. Peace to those who are elderly and are deficient in health. Peace to the lonely and those with few faculties to understand. Peace to the homeless. Carry them in your protective hand. Peace to our leaders, Worth of All Persons before political throne. Peace to travelers seeking to reach their families at home. Peace to the imprisoned, lonely and scared they might become sick. Peace to our economies, uncertain and at risk. Peace to our families, that fear might cease. Peace to each of us so we might grant peace in Jesus's name of hope we pray. Amen.



Brittany Mangelson

Amen. Thank you so much, Michael. It's good to hear from you. It's good to get an update of what is going on in your part of the world and to just hear your message of hope. So thank you so much for being willing to share with us today.

Michael Wright

Absolutely. Thank you for having me back on Brittany. Bye Bye. Ciao!

Josh Mangelson

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