

**Josh Mangelson** 00:17

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

**Karin Peter** 00:33

Welcome I'm your host, Karin Peter, and this is Cup of Joe, the church history series of the Project Zion Podcast. In this episode, we're visiting with Mahonri Stewart from Ogden, Utah. Mahonri is an educator and a published writer. He's also a playwright and some of you may be familiar with one of his plays that was produced in Provo I think first and some other areas. The name of that is The Fading Flower. Now today we're talking with Mahonri about his interest in writing theater and restoration history and how they all kind of converged into that text, The Fading Flower. And also we're gonna chat a bit about his continuing faith journey. So first, hi Mahonri and welcome to Project Zion.

**Mahonri Stewart** 01:27

Hi, Karin. So happy to be included.

**Karin Peter** 01:29

So I really appreciate that you could take some time to be with us here and that we finally had the opportunity to do this episode. So we have a couple of areas that we want to talk about. But before we begin, can you tell our listeners a little bit about yourself so they can get to know you a bit.

**Mahonri Stewart** 01:49

Sure thing. I'm a Provo Utah native. I spent a great deal of my life there. Although I've also lived in Arizona, California and spent a couple years as an LDS missionary in Australia. I grew up in a large Mormon family. I'm number 10 of 11 kids. My two parents are wonderful loving people who had room in their hearts for all of us. With all the challenges and blessings that come with that kind of large family. I have a little family of my own now. My wife Anne I, we have two kids, all of whom I love deeply. I grew up in loving literature, theater, film history, the humanities, the arts, all that. And so I gravitated towards that sort of thing in my education and my personal study. I received my purse, my bachelor's degree in theater arts from Utah Valley University. And from there I went on to receive my MFA degree in dramatic writing playwriting, and screenwriting at Arizona State University. I taught various English theatre and humanities courses on both college university and high school levels for the past 10 years or so. And what I consider my chief calling as a playwright, screenwriter, novelist and poet, also grew up with a strong spiritual identity, in part due to the influence of my family and culture, but also because I felt God's influence and spirit in my life for as long as I can remember. I'm still technically a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but I've been transitioning over to Communion Christ for quite some time. I was going to be baptized next month, but COVID-19 has made that difficult. So we're postponing it for next summer, hopefully, so that can be baptized and Nauvoo. I'm sure I'll talk more about that, about that picture in a bit.

**Karin Peter** 03:35

And I'm looking forward to that. That baptism, as well as our conversation today about that. So Mahonri, when did you write the play that I mentioned, the fading flower, which I should tell people is actually a story about an historical restoration figure, which is David Hyrum Smith. So when did that happen in this kind of narrative with what you talked about

**Mahonri Stewart** 04:03

Around 2002 is when I started, started writing it. And researching it was research was the first big component. And then the original version was performed in 2009.

**Karin Peter** 04:14

So my next question, why, why David Hyrum Smith? Why did that become kind of this interesting part of your journey because it's more than just writing the play. It's actually part of your spiritual journey that has brought you to where you are now. So first off, why David Hyrum Smith?

**Mahonri Stewart** 04:36

Alright, first, fair warning, explain all this stuff it, sometimes it might sound strange, those who don't believe in like spiritual gifts and promptings and personal revelation and all that because I know how that kind of thing has sounded to secular ears in the past. I have a very visionary worldview, which I inherited from my mom. She was always free talking about dreams and night visions and revelations, as she was talking about the weather. No, it was just, it was meat and drink to her. And that's a quality I inherited from her. I think and so I, that supernatural worldview, I have no problem with that I live in that. And so, another reason why LDS and Community of Christ narratives are important to me. But so whether people accept that or not, or they want to attribute to psychology or cultural conditioning or self deception, I'm good with people taking that worldview, if it makes them more comfortable,

**Karin Peter** 05:38

now that we take the view that we all have different spiritual, ways of connecting spiritually, and some are more mystical than others, and I'm thinking that's what you're describing.

**Mahonri Stewart** 05:50

Exactly. And because I need to be able to go there for me to even talk about my spiritual journey. It's such a essential part of it. So when I was late in high school, and when I was a missionary in Australia, I had a number of these like vivid dreams about Joseph Smith and Joseph Smith's family. I felt as if something important and persistent was trying to be communicated to me and the last of the series of dreams happened in Australia. And in this last dream, although I haven't had some since then, but the specific series, I saw Joseph Smith and his family, and they were looking forward as if they were taking a portrait. In fact, I saw it as if as if it were black and white or an old time sepia kind of photo. And in the dream, Joseph Smith's stood to the families, right, except he was a ghost. So Joseph Smith's the spirit figure in it. And then there was Emma right next to him. And then the children, their sons and their adopted daughter Julia. The Dream ended with Julia suddenly becoming powerful in contrast to the black and white of the photo which is why she becomes kind of a framing influence my play a truth teller, unafraid of the facts. I woke up from that dream with this vivid, powerful, beautiful, pervasive sense of the Spirit. And it was just filling the whole room suddenly had all these thoughts coming into my head, things about Emma and our family that I didn't know about which when I did my research later

ended up being true. For example, I had no clue that Emma's nephew, Hyrum Smith's son and future LDS Prophet Joseph F Smith, that he visited her when he was a missionary. And my research later confirmed that but that was something I was like, there these narratives like, almost downloading into my head. It was such a strange experience. But in fact, that visit to Emma and her family becomes a major plot point in *The Fading Flower*. I then felt prompted after that dream to look into a stack of old *Ensign* magazines like the LDS Church magazines that must have been in our church owned flat for years, you know that it seems like missionaries have been correct clicking the stack of old magazines. And I was led to an article about Emma about one of her descendants who had joined the LDS church, Gracia Ann Jones. Right off the bat the article confirmed a number of things I just felt like had been communicated to me. So this was all very kind of a supernatural, weird, powerful experience for me. And I felt this pervasive sense that God wanted me to understand the stories of Joseph, Emma, and their children. And that this information and their history, the history of their family, would be important to my spiritual journey. So when I returned home several months after that dream when I was finished with my mission, I dug into the research. I've already started studying Mormon history on a smaller level. In high school, there were these lectures from Truman G Madsen, my I read Lucy Max Smith's book. I had read this book called *The Martyrs* by Lyman Littlefield, you know, that my friend had given me because he knew what I was interested in that Joseph Smith stuff. And so even before my mission, I was starting to dig into some of these stories, but I was still just in those beginning stages. So although I wasn't a BYU student, I went to the BYU bookstore, sometimes because they had this interesting collection of books, I couldn't find other places, and of church history and different things. This was before Amazon was a big thing and really opened up my access to church history books. Among the books, there's a volume called *From Mission to Madness: Last Son of the Mormon Prophet* Tippets Avery. And this book was about Joseph and Emma's son David Smith, which I mentioned and I was shocked how little I knew about this fascinating person. He was a writer, a poet, an artist, and naturalist. So he had all that which is dear to my heart immediately. He was this artistic, sensitive soul that I loved. And he was somebody I really related to on, on a really personal level. He was a missionary and a leader in the then RLDS church, which later becomes Community of Christ, as we know. David went through this huge spiritual journey and transformation himself, as he eventually sought out answers about his father's contested practice of polygamy and tried to figure out who was lying to him about his father's past. With which side whether it was his whether his mother was right or whether Brigham Young was right or somewhere in between. And this was a huge strain on him. So eventually, whether because of mental illness, spiritual causes or the stress for the search for truth, or probably a combination of all those things. He has a psychotic break that is Shakespearean and it's tragedy and proportions. And he spends the last major part of his life in a mental institution. The fact that I didn't know any of this rich, complicated history, both floored and troubled and fascinated me. As I read the biography, and set me off on this huge Chase, as I dug into other Community of Christ sources and biographies about the Smith family. Emma, Joseph Smith the third, Julia, Alexander, Frederick, they all became very important figures to me, and I thought they were worthy of my time and research. And so it started this whole ball rolling.

**Karin Peter** 11:58

so I can I can see where the artistic and and the writer in David Hiram Smith would appeal to your, your nature and who you were becoming. What surprised me was that Emma was an early aspect of both the dreams or visions that you were having and also what kind of led you into starting the exploration.

Because my understanding is that Emma's not a real big historical figure in the LDS narrative of church history. So what about her sparked some of this with you?

**Mahonri Stewart** 12:45

Emma has an interesting complicated history in the LDS Church. First of all, I've always loved her. I grew up loving her and in the first couple have drafts of Painting Flower there's, there might have been times I was hard on her but some people, some readers and reviewers kind of pointed that out. I'm like, Oh, that's not what I intended at all. She's to me, she's the Electric Lady. And so I didn't grow up with that, that mindset necessarily. But the character assassination that happened to her in the LDS church, at first instigated by Brigham Young and his followers, still definitely has had its lingering effect with some in the LDS church. I definitely think that's true. But thankfully, I think quite a bit of that has lifted in the last couple decades last few decades, for Emma where there's a number of people who really revere her in the church in the LDS church, and, and there was, for example, there's this painter this lemon swindle. She painted a lot of paintings of Joseph and Emma together and they were popular in the 90s when I was in high school, and like, you'd go to Deseret Book and they'd be all over the place. And I think there was some efforts by some artists and some thinkers and some scholars in the church that kind of change that perspective, change that trajectory. So that there's a lot of people in the church who have write songs about her and who will paint her and she's almost become a romantic figure again, in LDS culture, and so, I think a lot of that has changed, but old school, sometimes old school Mormons, I still hear them say, really harsh things about her and I'm like, we're not on the same page here. I don't agree with that.

**Karin Peter** 14:45

Maybe some of your writing, and some of your productions will help continue that transformation.

**Mahonri Stewart** 14:53

I hope so. Although we'll see how many LDS people listen to me now.

**Karin Peter** 14:59

I don't know, we'll see! So I'm guessing that when the play that you wrote about David Harvey Smith's life when that was was first produced in Provo?

**Mahonri Stewart** 15:08

It's only had that one production in Provo. It's it, although it had a staged reading at BYU. I wasn't a BYU student, but Eric Samuelson, who just recently died last year. He was the playwriting professor there. And he and I knew each other and I can't remember if I've shown him the script or whatever. But he invited me to be part of this workshop, which was normally reserved for BYU students. That was at UVU at the time, and but he had enough faith and confidence in my work, that he wanted me to come over and workshop this at BYU. And so it was a hugely beneficial process for that project. So there was that and then it also had a reading at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. I wasn't able to attend, because I was so poor at the time. afford to get up there. And so I've always regretted that, but actually had that. I sent them a couple of my plays. And they surprisingly chose that one. I was like you chose my Mormon play? Interesting.

**Karin Peter** 16:14

Well, I mean, having read it, I can, I can see why they chose that.

**Mahonri Stewart** 16:18

Yeah, well, and it's it's not it's not warming kitch that way, it's very much challenging. And it's, it's a human story as much as a religious story. And so, in dealing with our historical past and our religious past, and a lot of ways it has some timely universal themes in there.

**Karin Peter** 16:40

So I'm, I'm just guessing now that the audience when it was produced in Provo in 2009, was predominantly LDS.

**Mahonri Stewart** 16:48

Yeah, it was. Although I have a sneaking suspicion there was some polygamous in the audience a couple times because there was one time where there was a talk back after one of the plays, and people had asked what my views of polygamy were at the time, and I said, Well, I don't support it right now, obviously. But, but there's a bunch of polgamist in the play and it deals with the topic, pretty in depth. And, and so I mentioned something about Warren Jeffs. And it's somebody raises their hand and said, this, this young woman and she says, not all polygamists are like Warren Jeffs. And, and I was like, You know what, you're right. I'm sorry. And, and I think that is also an important thing to realize is that this story is important, not just at LDS or Community of Christ. There's a whole group of polygamists and the Snufferites and all sorts of different people who who tie into the story and whose history is also important to recognize and and whether and even into the Community of Christ. There's all these break off groups, you know, Which which these stories are important to them.

**Karin Peter** 18:04

We all share these stories. Absolutely. So when you were writing this and as it became real as far as it would be produced, what did you hope the play would accomplish in the minds of the viewers?

**Mahonri Stewart** 18:18

That's a big question. A lot of those people were LDS, like you said, and so I had in the audience's, I'd say we're predominantly LDS. And so it's right there in the heart of Latter-day Saints central in Provo, Utah, home with MTC and the BYU and so many Mormon cultural icons. And that that's the environment I grew up in, right right there in Provo. And so what I as to what I think that I was going to accomplish, I had a number of people wonder the same Things like weather, what are you trying to do here? I bring up these complicated, often painful stories. Why I talk so much about Mormon polygamy in my place, especially since LDS Church abandoned its practice, like so long ago. And I opened these wounds that may cause doubt and distress to the LDS people I claim to belong to. I got a lot of these kind of questions. And and then this isn't my only play that touched on those things either. I had one about Joseph Smith's martyrdom called friends of God, which dealt with a lot with Joseph Smith's polygamy. So and these were coming from people, I love friends and family members who were suddenly looking me in a different light, which was not always comfortable, and wondering if I was a threat. So there's a lot of questioning of my faith from some quarters, and people casting aspersions on me. And that was really painful for me because my religious and spiritual identity is hugely tied up in all

of this And, to me, it's the central core of me. My relationship with Jesus Christ is vital to how I perceived myself. And yet, the Fading Flower actually sold really well. It was pretty packed most nights, so it must have hit a nerve with LDS people on some level. Some people new play project, they were the Mormon theater group that first produced the play. For me it was one of their best selling place they put on. There was this small but talented group. I still have a lot of friends, which I gained from that organization. They had put faith in the play and decided to produce it this fight it's challenging material. And but it had an earth people really enjoyed it. We got some really strong reviews from groups like the Association for Mormon Writers who loved it. And a good bit of media coverage from papers and podcasts some different things who took interest in at the time? And some people play projects like 100. What your secret? How did you get all this attention on it? It's like it's the subject I chose, this was something that mattered to people. And so I believe that's all that's because both people in the LDS church and Community of Christ have unresolved unresolved issues with our history that we want to engage with. On one hand, Joseph Smith story is powerful, it's spiritual, it's inspiring. I love it. it to me, he's a modern day superhero. However, on the other hand, there's a dark side to it. When human nature pumps against the divine and our fallen nature as a species exposes our weakness and sin. And so there's, there's terrible, terrible things that have happened in Mormon history. And so we have to engage with both sides of our history. If we're going to understand the relationship with that history. And if we're going to understand our relationship with God.

**Karin Peter** 21:59

You have talked about the that as your spiritual journey began to unfold after you first wrote this and you continued on that journey, that you had to go back and revise your play several times. Talk a little bit about that and, and why that became important for you?

**Mahonri Stewart** 22:22

First, I had to go through some revisions because I kept learning new stuff. Now, to borrow analogy from Shrek, history is like an onion. What you see on the surface is only the first layer. The more you dig, the more you research and search. The more you commit yourself to seeking understanding and alignment and the facts, the more is revealed to you. Mormon history is a complicated business with many conflicting stories and points of view and narratives which are competing against each other and trying to sort all that out, it's a lifetime of work. People who have been doing it for years and years and years and years and decades and decades, still have unresolved issues and unresolved questions and no defined answer to some, sometimes pretty basic questions as it's, for example, how involved was Joseph Smith with polygamy? You know, that that's, that's that was the one of the dividing points with LDS church and Community of Christ and there's still questions I have about that, whether he even practiced it or not, you know, and there seems to be a mountain of evidence on one side, but then there's these little holes in the arm around like, wait a minute, that's that hasn't been resolved yet. That question hasn't even like William Mark's comments or about Joseph coming to him and saying you need to execute you can excommunicate those polygamous in our mitts. Basically. How do you resolve that? When you've also got all these testimonies from from people who said they were his wives and different things. And so you want to honor all those stories. But somebody is lying in the midst of all this and it's not always clear who and so and so the second reason that for that revision was because of my ongoing relationship with communion Christ, the first version of the play, the one published by zarahemla books, which so you can still get that version of the play. And is there Hamill books is a



great little independent, adventurous Mormon publisher which I love that they do good work. They that that version of it represents my take on the material when I was a Latter-day Saint. And when I identified as such, the new version I just published through my company Prosper Arts and Media represents my changed perspective as someone who identifies with Community of Christ now so there's like these competing versions even if my play, on both sides of the divide much of the place and changed in both versions Original themes of seeking the truth despite the opposition and often painful answers in that search, those things are still intact. In fact, they're even more relevant and more important to me now. That's, that's one of the huge follow throughs in that play. I've also include more information about the old RLDS church. And this new version seven, which I only discovered recently, someone to which I knew Even then, when I did the first version, which I chose not to focus on at that time. Some of those reasons I did so were, frankly, confirmation bias. As much as I was trying to expose the truth of our shared history. Even then, there was a part of me that was still holding back. For example, when I did my original research, I came across Joseph Smith the third's visions that convinced him to lead the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, instead of joining Brigham Young's faction in the West, Joseph 30 considered I think that's funny that Joseph Smith, considered joining Brigham Young you know, he was on the verge of it, he would see he was in the midst of this kind of spiritual crisis himself. He says, Well, what if we're wrong? What if I am supposed to be over there? And then he skips these visions. And one of them, I can't remember if it's an angel or a guide, or if God tells them, but there's this voice that tells him that he stood in more light than the Brighamites did at that time. And so that convinced him he says, okay, whatever the true facts are here, I feel like I have more light here. And so in the original version of the play, I briefly referred to that vision, but not in any kind of depth. Because I was a very committed LDS person at the time, and you can see why this was a traveling narrative, a challenge to the authority of the church I was identifying with. As dedicated as I thought it was in seeking out the hard facts. It was one of the few places where I pulled my punches in writing to play. In fact, the actor who was playing Joe Smith, third At the time, a lovely man by the name of Adam Markel, who's still my dear friend. He asked me why I hadn't included that story when we were in rehearsals. Because I'd given him a lot of the same research. I used to study the character. I honestly don't remember the answer I gave him. But I'm sure it was far from adequate. Because the real reason was, I was afraid of that story. When I first read it, it given me pause. In fact, I believe I felt the spirit in that moment when I first read that and it was trying to communicate to me something about Joseph Smith the Third I'm not sure if I was ready for at the time. It was a story of wrestled with for many years before and after the play. For I felt my heart that Joseph Smith really had received those visions, and that they were from God. And I didn't know what to do with that. Because what did that say about my faith in the LDS church? What did that say about my views of the post Joseph Smith Jr. succession crisis in the church? These weren't comfortable. Questions for me that if I was not going to be hypocrite in this play, that was all about seeking the hard truth. I needed to face those hard questions squarely and face them. And I eventually did with some struggle and some wrestle and some "but God why?" Which is now why I associate myself with Community of Christ. There were other revisions, especially including the LDS Nauvoo stake president William Marks, who later became the early part of the RLDS First Presidency. He wasn't a character in the original version, although he's mentioned, but he's become a key figure in my mind to my faith journey and my understanding of this period. And so in this new version, I'm not going to include him. He's only in a couple scenes, but they're important things. And so William Marks his statements about Joseph Smith coming to them at the end of Joseph's life, before Joseph's martyrdom and Joseph telling marks that

the polygamists in the church need to be active excommunicated if they didn't repent. That was part of that original research I didn't include in the play at the first time. But which now I felt like, you know, it's not honest of me not to include this. And so I did.

**Karin Peter** 29:13

Your description of the struggle you had in your first version of the play in what do I do with this that doesn't fit? And isn't part of the faith building tradition of how the story is told. And it challenges my belief system. And as you described it, it it described the struggle Community of Christ has had in what do we do with the stories about Joseph Smith and polygamy?

**Mahonri Stewart** 29:45

Yeah, that's, that's something that some LDS people will challenge me with, like their, their primary reason for being a first they deny that Joseph Smith practice polygamy and second, they They thought that when it shows us descendants should be leaders of the church. And now both of those facts aren't necessarily part of the church, which begs the question, why? And when people ask me that question, why are you doing this? And those are arguments I used to use too, by the way, because I was very committed to the LDS worldview on a lot of a lot of points. And the only answer I have right now, is that this is where God wants me to be. And I felt that I felt that my spiritual journey, and I felt really connected to Joseph Smith's family. And so their trajectory became very important to me. And to me, in some ways, the polygamy question is still up, up in the air. Not that even necessary, Joseph Smith did or didn't practice it, but when did he abandoned it? When did he When did he decide? You know what? This is tearing us apart, because to me what a Marxist, really Marx's comments make that clear to me, at least how I interpret the historical record just to take on wives even in the LDS version of events, those last couple years, and there was a reason, you know, and I think he himself can how much is Brigham? How much is Joseph? How much is that history been changed by scribes? And because we know that Brigham Young changed the history of the church, that's, we had Willard Richards make some striking omissions. He, he literally, we can historically point that out and prove, yeah, Brigham Young was censoring history. And so at what point and then you look at things like the Temple Lot Case, where the LDS Church and the Community of Christ were, were battling over this piece of land in Missouri with a template Ben, and there's some unflattering things that come out about the LDS side of things. Why Why have you taken 20 years to put forth the story? Why have you and so there's an even people like Wilford Woodruff and learn to smell I think it was then I said, we have to hear this from him. We heard this from these other guys you know and so and again there's there's conflicting stories on on those points to that so there's still question in my mind maybe you didn't practice it maybe this has been because if if you could start out with the knowledge that somebody is lying to you that conspiracy is part of this no matter what that either Emma's lying or Brigham Young or whoever said you take the stories conflict enough that you know someone is lying. What do you do with that? And, and when can you trust the historical record anymore? If it's a whole groups of people, deciding this is our narrative. What do you do? And so, but I felt the Spirit guide me in this direction. And I still feel like there's still a lot of truth in the LDS church and that they still there's still a lot of faith claims that even the Community of Christ need to look at and say, Well, maybe Jesus did say that, or maybe he did do this, or maybe this conception of God is not as clear cut as we think. And but I think that has also led me to know that our relationship with God is personal. And that these churches which have been constructed for our benefit, for the most part, have been given to us are beautiful and good. And community is so so important.



Finding people who you can talk with and relate with and say, yeah, we might not agree on everything. But we agree that God loves us. And that revelation is a real thing. And that's another thing about the Community of Christ that really appealed to me was that Continuing revelation, things like women in the priesthood, for example, which I was advocating for the LDS church, which was another reason people look askew at me and said, mama, you're you're treading on apostasy here. You have the Community of Christ, believe it or not enough and continuing revelation, to realize we didn't have all the answers, and that there were still many things yet to be revealed. Which we need to accept, and that we need except our racism, and our sexism, and xenophobia, and our homophobia and, and really look at these issues squarely and say, how much of our past came from God? And how much came from our own prejudice? And so Community of Christ has a much better worldview, a much better approach, those sorts of questions. I felt God saying your places here your work is here. You need to be here. And I struggled with that. And I sometimes fought against it. Because it went counter to what I was taught. It went counter to what I grew up, I encountered my own self view and spiritual worldview of what I've constructed for myself. And those were hard questions for me to answer and that is a attended Community of Christ more and more, because of my research. First at first of all, was an intellectual curiosity to to be to be frank,

**Karin Peter** 35:31

To check us out?

**Mahonri Stewart** 35:32

Yeah, yeah. And to get context and to get perspective and to abandon some of that prejudice. You know, to like, you know, if you're going to write about a people, you might as well meet them and and so I attended There used to be a church down in the Provo orem area, which isn't there anymore, but I attended a meeting there. Then on my honeymoon with my wife, we went to Nauvoo and Missouri. That's how geeky we are in our Mormon, love.

**Karin Peter** 36:07

It's okay Mahonri, my husband and I went there on our honeymoon trip as well. So you're in good company.

**Mahonri Stewart** 36:14

And so we went there and we went to three church meetings that Sunday, we went to the LDS, we went to the Catholic Church, because there was a Catholic church. They were like, we're curious, let's let's go check them out. And then we went to the Community of Christ. And they're the ones who pointed me to words because I was also doing my research at this point, I was killing two birds with one stone I guess, but which may not seem terribly romantic, but what mainly was just me and Anne hanging out, so but there was another reason for me to be there. But we, we talked to the people afterwards, after church and they pointed us to David's chamber, where David used to write and I didn't know this place that existed. Because it doesn't mention it in the books I'd read. But it's where David used to go and write poetry and sing his songs and bring out his sketchpad and draw and paint. And so he had this little private wilderness, this little piece of nature that belonged to him in his mind. And so he would, he would go there and write, and I was like, only with this. But yeah, and so I attended there and then,

**Karin Peter** 37:36

You were talking about what led you to kind of check us out and explore us.

**Mahonri Stewart** 37:40

That's right. And so I was doing all this research and I started attending and I started feeling the spirit there. And I started feeling spirit when I'd go to meetings, and especially when I started becoming more uncomfortable to churches position on certain issues like women's ordination. I knew that Community of Christ had that. After that, Nauvoo trip for a honeymoon, I bought a copy of the doctrine covenants of the communion price version, and it read it all. And some of those later revelations, they're beautiful and inspired and full of the Spirit. I was like, what people say about Community of Christ in the LDS Church isn't true that they lost like that the apostatized that, that they're, they're miserable and sad. We need to save them or whatever. You know. I didn't feel that was true. Because I was receiving just as much light in Community of Christ as I was in the LDS church. And so I knew that God's I had this thought come to me the other day. The first in the Book of Mormon, and then in the New Testament as well, where Jesus says I have other sheep that are not at this fold. came to me really strongly the other day and says that's the Community of Christ. There. I have sheep in lots of different folds. And you can't look at people with prejudice because they don't belong to your congregation, that they belong to me. I am the shepherd. And I, I employee hirelings sometimes, but they are my sheep. And I decide what happens with them.

**Karin Peter** 39:28

So tell us where you where you are now, in your journey you participate with Community of Christ you've shared earlier in our episode, hear that you're looking forward to being baptized. faith journey, wandering through the epic that is Mahonri Stewart, where are you now?

**Mahonri Stewart** 39:50

Oh, that's that's a good question. Cuz I'm technically if I had my druthers, I could be a member of everything. As much as I disagree with Brigham Young on on some points. One thing he said, I really appreciate that Mormonism seeks all truth, no matter where its source. I think Joseph said something similar.

**Karin Peter** 40:17

That might be Joseph Smith the Third,

**Mahonri Stewart** 40:19

which doesn't surprise me, and Community of Christ allows me to do that. Community of Christ has had a very big tent and they allow a person to come in. And that's one thing you told me about actually, for a while. I was having trouble with the Trinity growing up LDS, that's not what we believed. We were very much about very separate beings, you know, Godhead. Different embody one and purpose. And I still believe some of that when John talks about out in John 17, when Jesus says, You are, I am one in the father mean, you will need to be one of me as I am one of the Father. That oneness of God made sense to me in that context that we are all become one with each other. Eventually, if we are following the Christian Spirit, and, and so I still don't have a problem with separate pains, but and so, but so the

Trinitarian kind of view, which is the official position of the Community of Christ. I struggled with that. That wasn't something that was easy for me, but then you, you told me and when you came to visit us and again, you said, Mahonri, we're not a creedal Church. You don't have to accept certain things to join with us. And that makes all the difference for me and my decision, I felt like that was the answer I needed then then you, you put me towards Lachlin Mackay, who, bless his soul. He's one of my favorite people right now. And that was another thing. I was like, you just put me in touch with one of your Apostles. How's that possible? the LDS church that cut in that context? That's not possible. Really. You don't pray you don't just you don't just call up. Jeffrey R Holland and have a chat. But you gave me that opportunity and says, Oh, I know somebody who loves church history. Let's put you in touch with Lach. And, and he was so loving and so knowledgeable and so accepting, and so open and honest about the history as like this, that my wife and I joke with each other. Sometimes we call it we call it the Community of Christ: Twilight Mormonism. It's the Twilight Zone Mormonism where we feel like we're still in a Mormon context. But this is so different from what we're used to, and being kind of more of a liberally minded person in a very conservative church and reversing that suddenly and suddenly we're like, oh, we're hearing messages, which we agree with. And we're hearing these beautiful, acceptin, faith promoting in the best sense. where a lot of that cognitive dissonance falls away. Like, no, I mean, I'm in line with what they're saying. This is, this is strange.

**Karin Peter** 43:43

Go from being on the margins, and have your faith questioned. To have the questions embraced would be quite a difference.

**Mahonri Stewart** 43:53

Yeah. And that questioning Spirit leads to Revelation. And that's why I believe the Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants is so much more full than the LDS version. We, the LDS hasn't added anything since 1978, since the blacks and the priesthood revelation. And that's how you know, Revelation that's more of an announcement, by the way. Before that, you have to go even to Joseph Smith, where and his vision of the afterlife to get anything comparable, and so that the Community of Christ claims we are receiving revelation now, not just on procedural things, not just on policy things, but written thus saith the Lord revelations, which are still written in a very humble spirit, by the way, and they're so beautiful and full of light and full of progress. To me, that was astounding. And I loved that. Even when I wasn't applying of commodity price even when I wasn't identifying, I was like, This is beautiful. We need this in the LDS church, we need this. Why aren't our prophets giving us revelation anymore? And those same old school way that Joseph Smith did. And Community of Christ never lost that.

**Karin Peter** 45:20

So I would imagine you described yourself as a visionary person, in my words, a mystic, which just seems to be confirmed more and more as we speak.

**Mahonri Stewart** 45:34

I identify with that very much.

**Karin Peter** 45:36

Yeah, I can see where the continuing revelation that entering principle would be. Very, very important in your journey. So you have lived through the beginning of questioning your faith tradition in which you were raised and having people then question your your face Yeah. You've lived through trying to navigate the tensions on what's true, what's not true? Or is there some middle space of perspective where all of this lives and on into actually now navigating, you don't call it a faith transition? You've called it a faith expansion. I think in the recent article that I read. What would you say to people who are finding themselves right now in the early steps of a faith transition? Having navigated that to the point you are now,

**Mahonri Stewart** 46:37

I would say avoid extremes. There's a lot of people who leave the LDS church also become very hostile and very bitter towards it. And I can understand that I totally understand that I had those moments myself. I had this interesting moment. I was reading Something by Kimberly Joe Smith. She was one of Joseph Smith and Emma's descendants through Alexander, I believe. And she joined the LDS church, but she really struggled with what she knew about Brigham Young. And she had this experience if I'm paraphrasing, because I am not, I don't have to document in front of me, but I'm struggling with this, there's some missionary who talked to her about Brigham Young and she's had all these like hostile feelings kind of rise up into her. And Brigham Young specifically has been one of the the hot points for me were the Mountain Meadows massacre, Parrish Potter murders, suppression of, of open thinking. A very autocratic governing style is is misogyny and his racism did harm to the church, in my opinion. And things like atom God theory and stuff which even the LDS Church no longer associates themselves with his statements. They're like, he was a man of his time. They've said as pretty much as much in recent essays and different things. And so there's a part of me because I grew up loving Brigham Young. You know, it's BYU is named after him. There statues everywhere of him, there's, you know, you go to chapel square, and he's a huge part of the narrative. And, and there were, and he did keep that people together and help them survive a very hostile environment. And so in many ways, I still feel like he had to work for the Lord, that he that there was things that the Lord accomplished through him, despite his weakness. But I haven't always felt that way. And, like Kimberly Joe Smith, she she felt like, she felt like she had this experience where she was able to forgive him. And that was something I felt recently where I felt like it was happening right before I read the article. So it was kind of serendipitous to be reading that, because it just happened a couple days before. But I had this experience where I was struggling with Brigham Young and I had some hard questions and like, I don't like this guy anymore. And I used to, and I felt, and again, this could just be my spiritual imagination, taking shape. But I felt him come into the room. And he said, "Mahonri, Will you forgive me?" And all my resentment suddenly faded. And he says, I know I was wrong. But I still want you to teach him why I was wrong. And not just excuse me for these things. Forgive me, but don't Excuse me. And so that's become kind of my mantra. Again, whether that's my imagination plain, or illegitimate spiritual experience, that's for other people to decide. But But for me, it was important for me internally to come to grips with that and come to grips with Brigham Young, especially with all I knew about him all I had studied. Mountain Meadows is heartbreaking, when you read the details of that, what they did, women and children and men, innocent people murdered and butchered. And for him whether he was directly, most accounts do not attribute him with directly making the order. Some do, depending on how you interpret the information, whether he did or not, excuse it, he covered it up. He he was complicit in the injustices that happened after the fact. And so that would put a person in prison. Honestly, Brigham Young was a traitor and a rebel to his

country. And that sense and so But even knowing that I feel like he's, he's forgiven. And that the Lord's mercy does amazing things, even with the most sturdy, sinful and unjustified of us, that it can take us that the thought of Christ can make us claim. That's one thing Well, for the witness said, he said, I saw the faults in Joseph Smith. I knew I knew his humanity, and I rejoiced in it. Because then that meant, there might be hope for me.

**Karin Peter** 51:38

Central Christian message.

**Mahonri Stewart** 51:40

Exactly. And that in my faith journey, that is, again and again when I come back to the essential Christian message, Christ grace, God's love, the redemptive power of that love, and how we are required to give that love to other people and that forgiveness to other people. Even Brigham Young and so to other people who are struggling with their questions, I would say that whether you believe in Jesus even more anymore, find a Jesus like love and find that power of redemption and forgiveness. I believe I'm becoming more and more I think more and more towards a kind of universalism, maybe not strict universalism. But where Joseph Smith at one point said, there'll be a lot more people haven't been you, and you realize it, those are my, my, that's my paraphrase of what he said. But he says, all of you are too judgmental of other people of other faiths. There are going to be so many people there, and we're going to rejoice together.

**Karin Peter** 52:51

Thank you for that Mahonri. That's a lovely way to come to the end of our conversation, but before we go on wanted to give you the opportunity to share just a little bit, you just had a novel published. Yeah. And the new age of miracles. Do you want to tell us just a little bit about that?

**Mahonri Stewart** 53:10

And that's my obsession form history spilling over again. That one goes earlier, though, into the days prior to the Book of Mormon, and to just first vision into the treasure seeking into the seer stones into that magical worldview as D Michael Quinn calls it It deals with a lot of that history. And so it's still again as a spiritualist and not spiritualist that makes me sound like I do seances, that's not true. As a visionary, as a mystic as you called me. I have no problem with any of that information. And so it's written in that lens where I'm like, yeah, Joseph Smith had a seer stone. Yeah, he was digging for treasure. Captain Kidd's treasure, whoever and yeah, he had laymen's and enchantments and a rusty sword, which they would make circles with. But it was all done in the context of his faith in Christ. in that era of American history that was common, where people would combine these supernatural, visionary, mystic beliefs with their Christianity. And so if God can touch a stone in the Book of Mormon, with the brother of Jared, and make a glow, why can't he use a system as a as a focus of Joseph Smith's spiritual imagination to give them revelation? And so, with me, I deal with a lot of those issues, and some people might call it apologetics in that sense, you know, where I still take it from a very faith building narrative. But it's one that's complicated. It's one that's messy. It's one that doesn't try to deify these figures in a church history which looks at their faults and their context and their historical moorings and say, let's look at it from here. And, and so the thesis of the book is that, what does it look like if all these stories are true on both sides, if what Joseph Smith is saying is true, also, all the seer

stones and all and all the magic paraphernalia and all of that. But if that's all true to how do those two things synthesize with each other? Where can God work in that context? And so that's that's what New Age Miracles is about.

**Karin Peter** 55:35

Okay. And what are you working on now that that has been published?

**Mahonri Stewart** 55:39

Right now I'm looking for count on very different series of novels. About although I'm going to work on the sequel to New Age Miracles too, but about mythology in the modern age about it's almost the X men meets X Files meets Greek mythology and world mythology. It's totally not anything spiritual, maybe and it's some it's some of the symbolism and I'm also working on a series about about Scottish history. Because I've got, I've got Mackay and Stuart blood and me running and the bucketloads and so I'm researching some of that right now.

**Karin Peter** 56:19

Hence the wonderful friendship between you and, and Lach.

**Mahonri Stewart** 56:25

Yeah, we have a family history good, connecting somewhere back there so fluently in the Scottish clans.

**Karin Peter** 56:32

So again, Mahonri, I want to thank you for taking time to be with us, and for sharing with us here on Cup of Joe, which is part of the Project Zion Podcast. For our listeners. I'm Karin Peter, and I've been visiting today with Mahonri Stewart from Ogden, Utah. And I'm going to close with just a phrase from a David Hyrum Smith hymn. It's one of them, it's in Community of Christ. It has been adapted by Maurice Draper later in reorganization. But the very close of the mid verse of that song says this, "Let us pray that we may ever since God's guidance in the way as we try to live for others for each other, let us pray." We'll end with that today. And thank you so much Mahonri for being with us.

**Mahonri Stewart** 57:29

Thank you, Karin.

**Josh Mangelson** 57:38

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