

Josh Mangelson 00:17

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

Brittany Mangelson 00:33

Hello, Project Zion listeners. This is Brittany Mangelson and I'm going to be your host for today. We are doing one of my favorite types of interviews. And I feel like I say that every time I do an interview, but I'm being honest, this time, this is truly truly one of my favorite types of interviews to do. They are our Fair Trade interviews, which feature stories of converts to Community of Christ, people who have found themselves later in life joining this community. So today we have on a new member and her name is Elle Mills Warner and she is in Seattle. And so I'm just going to throw it over to you really quick to introduce yourself and we will dive into the interview.

Elle Mills Warner 01:17

Well, thank you for having me. I am originally from Ogden, Utah, and was born and raised there. Graduated undergrad from Weber State University in French and international politics. I've moved around the country a bit lived in San Francisco, in Houston. Now here in Seattle, I have a master of divinity from Starr King school for the ministry. And I don't know what else to add in.

Brittany Mangelson 01:51

Awesome. I grew up in Provo, so I definitely know Ogden well. And I went to Utah State. So a little bit further north, but very similar, very similar. So, Elle, you were just confirmed. When was it? Was it last week? The week before?

Elle Mills Warner 02:10

Yep. One week ago today!

Brittany Mangelson 02:11

Okay, perfect. So, before we get into that, we're gonna talk about your background a little bit with faith. So why don't we just start at the beginning, whatever that looks like for you. I'm curious to know what faith and religion and church looks like you growing up?

Elle Mills Warner 02:30

Yeah. I grew up in a LDS faith tradition. I was baptized at eight, like most good Mormons are. And my family was an interesting mix. Because my mom was on and off active in the church. Growing up, there would be periods where she would take us every Sunday, and then periods where she wouldn't go. But she always professed to believe it. My dad, on the other hand, was inactive through my whole life.

He never went to church professed belief in uh, occasionally when the subject would come up, but never really talked about it very much. And my extended family on my mom's side was pretty active. And on my dad's side, they were kind of the stereotypical jack Mormons where, you know, we're gonna drink, we're gonna smoke, we're gonna do all the fun things. But if you ask us, yes, we definitely believe we would never question believing. And so that was kind of the home environment I was raised in. And when I was a teenager, I became very serious about the church. And I was attending every Sunday and going to seminary and really wanted to just completely immerse myself in the church, because at the time, it seemed like the most important thing in the world to me.

Brittany Mangelson 04:11

Yeah, that's really interesting to have a background like that. And I guess not take, I don't want to say the easy way out. But like, when you're socially pressured to go to church, like you had an quote, unquote, easy way out, you know, to like, not go because if your dad wasn't active, and your mom was on and off, like you really had to work for it, or like, grab on to your spirituality yourself. Like that's what it sounds like you're saying? Yeah, but it was it was a choice for yourself to join the community to be part of the community.

Elle Mills Warner 04:47

Yeah, it very much was, you know, during the times where my mom was more active, I would, you know, it'd be a lot harder to not go. She was loading us in the car and telling us but I have Really enjoyed going to church and I always had this kind of very deep spiritual connection growing up, and the church meant everything in the world to me, and the community I had there. But there was also this sense that I didn't belong in the community. And as a child, I really couldn't figure that out. But also, I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. So that was, that was always something that was just this persistent nagging in the back of my mind as I was in the church,

Brittany Mangelson 05:43

Do you think that because there was a varying level of act, of church activity? Did kids? Did your peers treat you differently? Did ward leadership treat you differently? Did you feel like a quote unquote, project and anyone with a Mormon background will probably know what that word means?

Elle Mills Warner 06:02

I never felt like one because I was active. And so the leadership didn't treat me differently. If anything, they praised me for being active when the rest of my family wasn't. And the kids never made fun of me for that they had a whole arsenal of other things that they would pick on me for. So that wasn't, that wasn't a huge issue. But I, I, yeah, I never felt like I belonged in the church. And I felt like, well, this is God's truth, and I need to find my place in it. And for a while, in my teens, the idea of conformity to it was where I went, I'm like, well, I've got to make this work. I've got a hunker down, if I'm not fitting in, that's my fault. I think that's a very common thing that a lot of people feel in the church that if it's not working, it's your fault.

Brittany Mangelson 07:02

Yeah, and that pressure to conform is such a response to that of that need that desire to fit in. And so you think like, Okay, if I just act like everyone else, if I look like everyone else, if I play the part, if I play my role, then everything will work out which I'm shaking my head, because it doesn't work.

Elle Mills Warner 07:22

No, no. And if it really was not ever going to work for me, I'm a trans woman. And growing up in the church I had, I just had this thought over and over again, that something wasn't right with me like something, something didn't match what I was being taught, but also I was really, really into boys. And that really was just not going to fly in the church. And so there was that struggle, and that tension through my teen years. And so conformity was bearing any desire, anything that I had, that was not in line with what they were teaching me. And of course, that led to me, you know, trying to focus the attention off of myself and pointing out anyone else's failures in the church, I became that person for for about a year or two. And then I had an experience that really started challenging my thinking. And that was when I was 15, I had the privilege of going to Europe on a special program for us. And the first place that we went was Rome, and we toured the Vatican, and seeing this 2000 year old church, with more power than any religion has ever had, and more history than my church could ever dream of. And being in the epicenter of that church, and just seeing everything It was. It was breathtaking for a 15 year old who was pretty sheltered from the world. And we went to several other churches and cathedrals on the trip, but the Vatican really stuck with me. And I remember coming home and just kind of thinking, what was that thing? That was not, you know, that was not Temple Square, that was not anything that I'm used to. And so I went to the library, and I checked out every book on Catholicism that they had. And then I started reading about Christianity in general. And about that same time 9/11 happened, and everyone was talking about Islam. And so I started checking out books on Islam and that just kind of was into exploring religion in general. I started reading everything I could about it.

Brittany Mangelson 10:12

Yeah, again, I'm just really impressed at your, the drive that you had to not shove religion away or not be afraid it sounds like I don't want to put words in your mouth. But it sounds like you maybe felt the Spirit felt, God's Spirit at the Vatican. And maybe that was a little jarring for you, because I know what you were taught, right? Like, you're not supposed to feel the spirit outside of someplace that's not like Temple Square, but that that sent you on a journey of seeking for yourself and exploring religion in other Christian Christian sects, and then in Islam, just that you allow that experience to open yourself up instead of closing in, and I'm just really impressed by that, that you were able to do that at 15.

Elle Mills Warner 11:00

Yeah, it was, you know, and I passed it off to myself is just curiosity. Even though I knew there was something much deeper driving me, it really was like, when I was in the Vatican, I felt something I'd never felt before in my life, something that I felt had been missing. The I just couldn't make that same

feeling happen anywhere in the LDS church. And I again, thought, maybe that's me, maybe there's something wrong with me. And about a year into reading about that when I was 16-17, somewhere in there. I had a friend who was Greek, and her dad was actually the priest at the Greek Orthodox Church in Ogden. And she invited me to Orthodox Easter, which is usually on a different date than Western Easter. It's usually at least a week later, if not all the way up to a month later, because I use a different calendar than we do. And I was like, Well, yeah, you definitely want to go explore that, like, you're not going to turn down the invitation to go see that. And I thought it was going to be a lot like Catholicism, because in my studies, I learned that they were the same church for the first 1000 years and split. And, you know, I had read some things about it. And then I walked into that building and all my expectations went flying out with stained glass windows. There was, it was very different. It was very ancient, like the Catholic Church is an ancient church, but they've modernized quite a bit. The Orthodox Church has not, and they are doing things that they've been doing for centuries, if not millennia. And you really feel that when you're in there, and I had that same feeling that I had in the Vatican, this feeling of God's. And I left the service just like on cloud nine, until I got home. And I felt guilty that I had felt it there. And I just couldn't feel it in my own church. And that started a faith crisis in me. And at the time, I was in such black and white thinking, I was like, it has to be one or the other. And you know which one is true. And that really started me down this rabbit hole of trying to find the true church, in my mind. And I eventually kind of concluded I didn't believe in the LDS church anymore. And I admitted that to myself, around age 17. And even just admitting it to myself and writing it down in my journal felt like a huge betrayal of my family and my ancestors. I had ancestors who came across the plains with Brigham Young I had ancestors who had gotten on boats and sailed halfway across the world from Wales to be in Zion, and you know, these people who had given up everything was I just going to turn my back on the gift that they given me. And yeah, I, I thought about all my social relationships and how many of them were built on the church, most of the meaningful ones were. And I thought, okay, no, you've got to push this down. You believe you definitely believe you ought to just plow forward through that. And I ended up trying to make it work. I was going to church and to mutual and each time I went I just felt hollow. And then, again, telling myself you're just curious, you want to see what else is out parents. started going to other services, I went to Catholic services, Buddhist services, I went to a friend's Baptist Church. Just a number of things just to tell myself, you know, you're just looking, you're just, you're just filling in the blanks of what you've studied. Even though I'm on some level new, know, you're looking for your home. And it was a very lonely time, it was also a time of a lot of very intense family stuff. I was going through a lot of abuse the hands of my father, and also dealing with my sexuality and everything else at the time, it was not, not an easy time in my life. And so I felt lonely. I think I felt lonelier than than I had ever had felt in my life.

Brittany Mangelson 16:02

Yeah, that is understandable, especially because living in Utah and having multiple markers, quote, unquote, against you, and having the guilt of your pioneer ancestors, I know that guilt as well, to go through all of that while working through your sexuality and while trying to deal with home life. And while trying to be a high school student. Sounds To be honest, unbearable, that's a lot for a 17 year old

to go through at once and to have your faith being challenged, your beliefs being challenged, and not being fully free to explore that and to figure out who you are in a safe environment. Like that's just that's a lot. That's a lot to go through.

Elle Mills Warner 16:56

Yeah, and I don't know, it was, it was just, it was overwhelming at the time. But I, I just kept telling myself, you can make this work somehow, you know, you got, you've just got to believe and I realized I didn't believe and there was a lesson on the Book of Abraham in seminary. When I was in my senior year of high school, and the teacher had like, a globe and was showing how like, you know, the days are caused by the turn of the axis and it's like, been on Kolob a day is 1000 years and everything and, you know, looking back on it, I'm not sure how, like, official that teaching knowing what I know now, but that that's what my teacher chose to do. And they were just talking about Kolob and, and everything. And I remember hearing about this and reading about and everything. But at that point in time, I was just like, "What? What are you talking about?" Like, for the first time of my life, it just sounded so ridiculous. And I actually raised my hand and I said, you don't really believe this do you? And he asked me to wait in the hall! (laughter)

Brittany Mangelson 18:32

Yikes!

Elle Mills Warner 18:38

I mean, I was one to ask questions and things like that. But that was the first time I'd really like stepped out of line and said something like that. Um, and basically just kind of told me, you know, you can ask questions, but you need to be respectful about it. And you know, we're here for your questions and all this thing. And I was like, okay, maybe I shouldn't phrase things quite like that. After after that there was one more seminary class I remember attending, there might have been one or two in between that the the next one that I really remember was, they had the missionaries come and they were basically teaching us ways to convert our friends ways to share the gospel with our friends. And I've thought about all my non Mormon friends in this and I was just like, I'm not going to give you their, and they actually gave us a little blue slips of paper, and so give us the names of all of your friends are any inactive people that we can come visit. I looked at this and I'm like, I'm not going to go put my friends names on these and have you go and talk to them about something i'm not sure i believe anymore. And I tore up the little slip of paper I wrote blasphemy over all the little bits I stood up, threw it in the garbage can walked out, and I didn't go back to seminary after that.

Brittany Mangelson 20:16

What a sassy exit! I love it.

Elle Mills Warner 20:21

I am a dramatic person I come to really acknowledge that. You know, I didn't say anything as I got out, but I just I, that was that was my exit. I never do anything quietly. My mom always laments that. But I still didn't tell anyone. And then a couple of weeks later, we were we went to a midnight showing of some movie, my friends. And I did that all the time back when that was more of a thing before they started releasing movies the Thursday before. And I drove one friend home, and she told me that she didn't believe anymore, and that she was worried about that. And I was like, Oh, thank God, there's another one. And we'll lean on each other and kind of told everyone together. And that didn't go over well, we strained friendships, I lost a lot of friends. And I watched my social network, overnight just evaporate. And so I felt even more alone than I had before. But I also learned who my real friends were in that. And I, you know, I think people always come to a point in their life where they have to learn that lesson. And unfortunately, this was the time in my life where I had to.

Brittany Mangelson 22:04

Yeah, gosh, that's really intense. I I honestly don't know how young folks how people who are either in high school or college are able to leave the LDS church, because so much of your social structure is built around church and so to, to step away from that is just really intense. But like you said, it sounds like you did learn who your best friends were, you know who your real friends were. And I'm glad that you did have that one friend that confided in you, and then it provided a place for you to confide in her and find some some common ground there.

Elle Mills Warner 22:47

Yeah and the friendships that I did maintain are still my closest friendships today. And to the point where they actually feel like family to me in a way that even my own family doesn't. You know, we've been through a lot together in these friends. You know, and we've, we've changed a lot through our lives and still maintain this closeness. I, you know, I, I'm so glad that these people were there for me through that.

Brittany Mangelson 23:25

Yeah, for sure. I'm really glad that you still have been able to maintain relationship with them. That, yeah, they're still part of your support group. That's really, really important. So I must say, I'm, I don't want to like skip us ahead. But I want to, I'm very intrigued. I didn't realize you said you had an mDiv?

Elle Mills Warner 23:46

Uh huh.

Brittany Mangelson 23:46

Okay, so that tells me that your little seeking heart that started when you were a kid that took yourself to church or you know, chose to be involved, that that is just kind of who you are. So I have like that in the horizon of how, how does the story get to that point? What else? What else happened? How did you take

control of your faith story? And, and I guess the reason why I ask it that way, is because so many times and I can speak for myself, when you go through a faith transition, it almost feels like you're left with so much rubble, and how do you move forward to try to build something from, you know, these, this relationship with God that you had or that you want to maintain? And what is true? What is what is not, what is culture? What is, how do you read scripture? I mean, you know, this, there's so many different points of rebuilding. And so the fact that you have gotten an M div sends a strong message to me that you were able to do it. So just keep telling your story.

Elle Mills Warner 24:57

Oh, yeah. It's it's a It's funny because this, when I was going through it, I thought this was going to be the end of the story that I was going to find something. And oh, this was just the beginning. Like, all of that was the prologue I found out. Yeah, when I first left, I thought, you know, well, you felt things in the Greek church, it's an ancient church, you've been looking for the, the church, Jesus found it. So it's got to be, you know, your options are the Greek Orthodox Church, the LDS Church, the Roman Catholic Church, that was kind of the mindset I was in at the time. And I started taking catechism classes at the Greek Orthodox Church. And there was just something in me that was like, This isn't where you belong. And I loved the Greek church, but I just couldn't make that work. And so, you know, that left the option of Roman Catholicism for me in my mind, and that's where I ended up going. And I threw myself into that. And I ended up being baptized at Easter Vigil the following year. And the whole time I was in the Catholic Church, I felt this call to the priesthood, which I knew would take a while for me to be able to go into the priesthood. And so I started thinking, well, maybe you should do some things to prep yourself for that. Why don't you read this Bible thing everyone's always talking about, you've never actually read entirely on your own. Maybe you should read that and that will help you. And so I did one summer, I sat down, and I read the whole Bible, every book, I didn't read in order I had the deacon of the Catholic Church, I was that told me never do not read it from Genesis to Revelation, you'll get bored, and you'll never finish it. Read each book that as a whole book by itself, and then move on to a different one. Which is always how I tell people to read it. Because Yeah, you'll get bored if you just start in Genesis. So I read the whole book, and I remember getting to the end and going what an awful book. There's just so much horror in it. And very little, like transcendent wisdom or anything like a lot of it was just these terrifying stories and these just horrible acts people do in the name of God a lot of it and and I realized how much of the Bible in like seminary in childhood and everything had been presented to me in a very whitewashed and easy to digest manner and that none of the like, really complex issues were in there like, yeah, Moses killed somebody and fled charges for most of his life, or, you know, God commands Joshua to commit genocide, and he gleefully does. And the entire book of Judges, oh, that was a, that was a book. And way, just the the terrors of the book of Revelation and all these things, it was just so hard to digest and so hard to accept. And I, I kind of thought, I don't know if I'm a Christian anymore. After reading the Bible, which was certainly not what I thought was going to happen by reading that book. And I started drifting into more of an earth centered spirituality at that time. I had friends who were practicing with Wiccan, so I started kind of moving into that. And I decided to go to college at that point, and I started studying international politics. And that exposed me to the horrors that

happen in this world every day and the really challenging things. There were one of the courses I had to take ended up being a genocide studies class, that is not how it was billed to us, but that is what it ended up being. And if you want to see the absolute worst of humanity, you should read the books that I had to read and watch the movies I had to watch in that class. I don't think you could get any worse of humanity than that. And I fell into this chasm of just despair about the world and I really was Like if there is a God out there, and this is the best that he can do, I'm not interested. And I really got mad at God and lost faith in God completely and moved into this very hostile atheism at the time.

Brittany Mangelson 30:21

What was that a was that a relief to you? Was it heartbreaking? I mean, how did it feel to be, to feel so left down, let down from God, by God?

Elle Mills Warner 30:37

It was, it honestly felt like a divorce, or like I had lost someone who had been there my whole life, you know, like a death. You know, Nietzsche said, God is dead, and we had killed him. And I understand that lament. And I became very, like, surly and antagonistic towards religion at the time. You know, I had already gotten to a point because Catholicism is very fine with science and very fine with evolution and things like that. So like the normal arguments that people had against God, those weren't what concerned me. What concerned me was just the things that are allowed to happen every day. And that no one will come to most of these people's rescue that most of them will die alone and scared. And that was what I had a problem with. So there was a sense of, there was the sense that I had deluded myself into believing in God. And that was, there was a lot of self anger at the time with that. And I thought that was where I was going to stay. And then things took a very different turn, I ended up entering one of the worst depression spells in my life at the end of 2014. Or 2013. Rather, I, I had a lot of setbacks, romantically a lot of setbacks, professionally and personally. And felt like I was just falling flat on my face. And just before New Years, I started coming out of it, and I thought, okay, you need something to distract yourself. You've always wanted to visit different religious traditions that you've studied, and why don't you visit in the new year, a different religious tradition every week? And keep a blog on it? And so I did. That was my 2014.

Brittany Mangelson 33:15

Every single week, he went to a new religion?

Elle Mills Warner 33:20

Yep. I and I did this in Ogden, Utah. And most of the churches were in Ogden. Some of them I had to go as far south is South Jordan, or actually can't remember Bluffdale bluffdale was the furthest I went for one. But yeah, most of them were in my backyard in Ogden, and Utah is one of the most religiously homogenous places in the country. So if it's that diverse in Ogden, Utah, it's not diverse this in this whole country.

Brittany Mangelson 33:54

So real quick, I'm not entirely sure but I think I've read your blog! Did you go to the Salt Lake, or not the Salt Lake you did you go to the Ogden congregation?

Elle Mills Warner 34:08

Yes. I did.

Brittany Mangelson 34:09

Community of Christ Congregation? Okay. We're having one of those moments live on Project Zion! I really think I read your blog because we started looking into Community of Christ in 2014. And I was googling and just I am pretty sure that I came across your blog. Did you also do some YouTube videos or no?

Elle Mills Warner 34:34

Yes, I did! That's me. (laughter)

Brittany Mangelson 34:39

This is the best! (laughter) Okay, I'll stop talking. But I did consume your material and keep talking.

Elle Mills Warner 34:46

Yeah. It's funny. I actually come across that a lot in my various religious circles. Like a number of people are like, that was you? Yeah, that was me. That happens all the time. And I was still approaching things in a lot more skeptical way at that time. But I was, I had softened quite a bit from my more surly days. And I was, I was realizing that a lot of the assumptions that I made about people were wrong in these traditions, I kind of also learned that what official doctrine is in all these things is not necessarily what people believe, or how they live out their faith, which that was a big eye opener. Because, you know, in the faith tradition, I grew up in you if you didn't believe and live it out the way that it was taught, you risked excommunication. So seeing that, that wasn't necessarily how people were. And then in some of the churches, I went to the had some of the most, in my mind, you know, oppressive dogmas and doctrines and fundamental things that some of them ended up being some of the most kind, open minded people that I encountered. And that was really counterintuitive. And then, about halfway through this, called a ministry started coming back to me. And I was like, "No, no, no, no, put that down. That's a no." Then I got done with the project. And there was nothing distracting me from that anymore. And I thought, Okay, well, you could be an atheist and a Unitarian. Why don't you look into the Unitarian seminaries. And so I did, and I applied to Starr King, which was my first choice, and I got in, and I uprooted my life and went to Berkeley. And seminary was very transformative for me. And the strange thing I went to seminary and I found God. And I went down the entire path for ordination in the Unitarian Universalist Church. I did everything I did the congregational internship, I did a unit of chaplaincy internship. I got my Mdiv, I jumped through every hoop I danced whenever they told me to dance, like I did everything. And I got to the end, where I was just about to submit all my paperwork to

the credentialing body. And when, I've been feeling for a long time, in it, that this was not where I was supposed to be. But I chalked that up to cold feet, or not wanting to commit to something or whatnot. But I remember someone, it was my supervisor, and CPE, which is a chaplaincy internship program. And I was mentioning these struggles I was having and that I wasn't sure if I could stay. And she said, and she's a minister in the United Church of Christ. And she told me that, you know, it's not uncommon for people to have cold feet and everything when they get to this point. But I realized at the end of the day, these were my people. And for better or worse, God called me to serve them. And it was that sentence that made me go, "Oh, that's what's wrong. These aren't my people." And I realized I had to leave at that point. And it took it took me a little bit of time to actually do that. But then I felt like I was in a dinghy in the middle of the ocean. What do you do now? Where do you do you built your entire professional and personal life into this? And and now you're, you're without a denomination, you're without a professional plan, like, what do you do? And it reminded me of the time when I left Mormonism and just kind of felt like I was alone in this sea of possibility, but no direction.

Brittany Mangelson 39:40

So what did you do? I mean, I'm, clearly you did something. Because I'm hearing you talk. I'm like, Oh my gosh, because you've been through so much at this point, right. You've already left one church. You've tried out at least 52 other churches. You know, you've been invested you, you've learned about other religions, you have just worked so hard to find a faith community and to find a pathway to God that works for you and to get all the way through seminary and to get to that point, and then realize, ah, these are not my people, that has to be devastating. And I just thought that's a lot of blows to hit one person. So how did you how did you move forward after that,

Elle Mills Warner 40:30

um, the way that I moved forward was I, in I felt like I needed to be lost for a bit that I needed to figure things out. And I went down to my friend was starting a ministry in El Paso working with migrants after the Trump administration had started doing their horrible horrible things down there. And I went down there to help them get everything off the ground with that. And then I spent a summer down there doing that. And then I ended up back in Utah for a bit before just kind of going, Well, is there anything here for me right now. And I reached out to some of my connections, and I ended up getting a job at a nonprofit here in Seattle, which is what I'm doing now. And I love it utilizes a lot of my chaplaincy skills. So it's been a great fit. And once I got here and settled a bit more, during seminary, there was this sort of feeling that I had from, from God kind of saying, you know, all these religious traditions that you've had, they're all sort of languages that you use to understand me to the nothing is that these are all man made doctrines. And you know that you've done that for a long time. But there are different ways that people have tried to express there awe and the unexplicable things that have happened, and the the things that they see in the world. And so these are languages, but they're not the ideas, they're not the feelings, they're not the core of what people are experiencing, just ways to express it. And you've had the chance of being multilingual. And so you have to learn how to reconcile your past. So in seminary, I reconciled my past with Catholicism with their centered traditions with Greek orthodoxy. And I found

ways to make that work. And a lot of it is tied into Jewish mysticism, strangely. And I tell people, I'm multi religious, and that I'm not mixing and matching these to create my own thing that when I'm in these religious traditions, I am fully, when I'm at Mass, I'm fully participating as a Catholic and I'm fully present there. I'm not adding in my own things. When I'm in a pagan circle, I'm there completely in that space. Same when I'm at a Greek Orthodox Church, these things are just they're different paths that I use to connect to God. And then sometime last year, it was almost as if God came and said, you know, how I made to do that with all the other religions? Well, I'm going to make you do that with Mormonism now. I was very resistant when I'm like, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, we closed that door. For now, going back that was that was traumatic that was like, nope, we're not going there." And of course, we went there because, you know, God had different ideas for me. And I, I had remembered Community of Christ from my blog, and from some contacts I had, from that, who I who I talked to, but I had never like really seriously sat and thought about Community of Christ. But I started looking into like John Hamer's history on it and everything. And he's somebody that I've talked to on and off through the years. He found me through my blog. And the more I started studying that, the more I kind of realized how fascinating the history of the Latter Day Saint movement was, and how complicated it was and how it was. A lot of the early movement was a lot closer to my own sort of religious journey than I had. had given a credit for like a lot of the I started reading a lot of it and I'm like, Huh, I can see like a lot of my friends from seminary getting involved in something like this or starting something like this. And things just, you know, snowballing out of control like they did at points in the early Latter-day Saint history. Like, I could actually see people I knew in in this. And I realized that there was a lot that I had given up by, by not exploring that part of myself that when I, you know, wholesale, rejected everything from my Mormon past, there were things about my own self in my own identity that I had given up in that. And that a lot of that was rooted in this pain. And this not wanting to look at that part of part of myself, because every I associated everything with that with pain. And then I thought, Okay, well, I know Community of Christ is a lot more open. And if they're willing to allow these kind of history, lectures and everything, maybe it's worth looking into them a little more. And I started attending online services. And I had this feeling in the services that I had to do online, because COVID, I got to discover this church during COVID, which has been very interesting. But as I was doing the online services, and seeing all these people on zoom, I realized these are my people like, in our sense of that they share the religious heritage that I have, they share, in some cases, probably DNA, and language that other people don't understand. And then there was this sense of camaraderie. And then I ended up watching one of the YouTube videos that from World Conference, where they were singing the Spirit of God. And I got, I just had this extremely emotional reaction to it, because I realized, here are my people singing the song of my people on the land that Joseph Smith called Zion. And it has absolutely nothing to do with the church in Salt Lake City. Nothing at all. It was kind of discovered, you know, being rejected by your immediate family, and having a lot of pain and baggage, but then discovering there was a really cool cousin out there, you've got you understood what you were going through and everything and that you bonded. And I, I kept attending services. And the more I attended, the more this piece of me fell into place that this was, these were my people, and this is my home, this is where you belong. And that's not something I've gotten in any other religious tradition. And I've been allowed to keep everything that I

have already, that I wasn't expected to change or give up anything that I got to bring it all. And, and that that was not only accepted, but it was celebrated in my congregation. And that it was, my questions weren't ignored, they were encouraged. It was a better homecoming than I could have ever expected. And that's really been kind of the theme of this whole thing was coming home, when I thought I would never have a home.

Brittany Mangelson 48:52

Wow. So, so often, with these interviews that I've done with people who have come from the LDS church, I often end up crying. And I did get teary eyed, because so many of our stories are so similar. And even though the particulars of them might be different, and you know, where we grew up, or a family background or whatever it may be, you know, one of the things that that LDS folks often say is the church is the same wherever you go, right? It's so correlated. It's so much a part of you, no matter if you grew up in the United States or somewhere else. And what I've found is that that means that when you leave that community, again, our stories are the same, because we have the same foundation, the cultural foundation, the doctrinal foundation. And so I always am just so struck at Yes, the stories are very different, and yet they're so exactly the same and hearing you talk about seeing the World Conference sing the Spirit of God, I remember that as well. And just recognizing like, Oh my goodness, there is a community that, from my perspective, has taken some of the best things about this foundation that I shared with them. And like you said that it was totally different from the church in Salt Lake. And for me, it's it's just been a continuing unlayering of that reality and being being able to still maintain my pioneer heritage, and the pioneer heritage of my brothers and sisters of people who have come from the LDS church and celebrate that we don't have to give up who we were in order to be celebrated in this new community. So I just loved hearing you verbalize that because that has been my experience, too. Yeah.

Elle Mills Warner 51:02

Yeah. And it made me realize the all of the people in the Latter-day Saints, Latter Day Saints, traditions, they're all my family. And that means the the, my LDS family and friends. Yeah, they're my family. They're my kin. They always been, they always will be the ex Mormons. You know, you leave Mormonism. Yeah, you stopped believing you never really stopped being Mormon. Like I think, you know, I think those of us who've made that journey really kind of realized that at some point, you're, you're always in the church, even if you're out. And that also means that the people being held hostage by doctrine and everything in the FLDS church, under the horrifying abuses that have happened under Warren Jeffs, those are our siblings, and we owe them, we owe them the loving care that we would give any of our siblings and that we have to be there for them on some level. I don't know what that looks like right now with how insular they are. But those are our siblings suffering. And put in that perspective, the church became a lot wider. For me, it's not any single denomination. It's all of us with this shared heritage and shared family. We have to be there for each other.

Brittany Mangelson 52:40

Yeah, I think that raises a really important and challenging point. I know that I've participated in the Sunstone Symposium here in Salt Lake. And, gosh, I would say no less than a dozen churches are represented that all tie themselves back to Joseph Smith. And I've had a lot of conversation with different leaders in different churches and recognizing, you know, when I hear the story of their church, when I hear the story of their doctrine and their theology, it's very similar to what I grew up with. It's very similar to in Community of Christ, we have these old preaching charts. And it looked very, they looked very much like an LDS plan of salvation. And, you know, Community of Christ has largely moved from that point, to a deeper understanding of who God is and what the quote unquote plan is. But at the same time, it's still part of our story, right? It's challenging, because I don't think as much as we want to separate ourselves, whether we are ex Mormon or whether we're lifelong Community of Christ or whoever, it's all part of the same story. And that's, that's challenging. So, with that, I'm I'm wondering, I'd like to hear because your thoughts early on Community of Christ almost made me cry. So I'm wondering if you can share a little bit more what has kept you coming back? You said that you essentially found the church started investigating the church during COVID so that compromises how how things look. But what has kept you coming back? What are your what are the things that you are most interested in, in Community of Christ? What, what what what's gotten you excited?

Elle Mills Warner 54:32

A lot of things have gotten me excited. I have custom facilitated some worship services and our congregation does Thursday night. activities and things like that, and I've led some of those. And a lot of it I've been able to utilize some of my art centers traditions and that and everything. So the fact that not only can I have that, but I can actually, you know, benefit the community in some way has been wonderful. And also just like a lot of the relationships that I've built in the community, with people who understand where I've been, and that's, that's been huge having that. There's also just been, you know, the worship services are both very different from what I grew up with, and strikingly familiar at times, hearing the same prayers, that communion that I grew up hearing, obviously, with modern language, but the same prayers, and having the same sort of structure expressed very differently. But the same sort of structure as far as priesthood and other things. There's, there's a sense of familiarity that I, I didn't realize I needed in my life. Having someone like Karin, who, I haven't even really expressed this to her. But there was in one of our meetings, I asked her if she could just give me a blessing at the end of it. And she did. And having somebody who was a president of the 70 pray for me and have it be a woman had have it, the this prayer uses my own name, my real name, and uses the pronouns that I had always wanted to hear. I didn't realize I needed to hear that from somebody and how deeply impacted I was from this very simple blessing that I'm sure she didn't think about at all. And, you know, just just said, whatever came to her heart, and, and yet, it meant everything in the world to me. In my own healing, and in my own journey to have that happen. Something that I didn't realize was even possible, and something I didn't realize I needed. And, and just a lot of the things that have come up in sermons that I feel like challenge me and move me into trying to be a better person in this world. There's a lot that keeps me coming back. In spite of COVID, in spite of zoom fatigue, which has kept me from attending a

few services lately, cuz some mornings, I just wake up and you know, zoom so much of my day that I just wake up some Sunday mornings ago, no, I actually am not going to get on that thing.

Brittany Mangelson 58:00

I definitely know how that goes. And in fact, I haven't been doing as many Project Zion interviews during COVID, because I in part, because I'm so zoomed out. So it sounds like you earlier when you said that you felt like you would found your people, it sounds like that is true, that you are able to be your full self, your whole self, the person who you've always been, and that that person is now being affirmed and celebrated and welcomed in a way that just feels really normal and natural. And just again, I get really close to crying a lot of episodes. But just that you you have come home. And I think that that is that is the story that so many of us have shared. And I think we'll continue to share. So thank you. Thank you for for sharing that. So what what are your hopes for Community of Christ? What do you what do you hope to do in your congregation? I mean, again, this is COVID. So it's a little bit tricky, but what would you and then what would you say to other people who are maybe looking into Community of Christ? How would you, I guess, like verbalize who Community of Christ is to them.

Elle Mills Warner 59:36

As far as my hopes, I really look forward to the day when I can meet everybody in person at the church itself. Like I've dreamed about that since I started coming to these online services. And I've met a few people you know, one on one, socially distanced with masks on and everything from the congregation, but it's, you know, I want to actually be in a worship space. with everybody, and hopefully sometime this year that gets to happen. I'm hoping to get more involved than I am right now and to be challenged and to be able to do a lot of the deep spiritual work that the you can only really get in community. And my hope is to see the church continue to grow and to ask difficult questions. That's one thing I love about this church is that difficult questions are not shied away from their tackled head on and that it is uncomfortable, and that it leads to a lot of hurt feelings, but it's still addressed, it's not buried under the rug. And I'm hoping to see more of that and to participate in these discussions and these challenges into, to have my own beliefs challenged in it. As far as what I would say to others, exploring You know, there's, if this is where you feel called you, you'll, you'll find people who are willing to embrace you, in this movement, I'm not going to say everyone will, because I you know, it's a it's a large enough movement, that there's, there's a number of voices, but that you should not be afraid to come in with your whole self. And to be honest with yourself and with others as to where you're at with all of this and and to just trust, just trust in the divine, whatever that word means to you right now. That there's a place for you somewhere, even if it doesn't end up being here.

Brittany Mangelson 1:02:12

Ah, that's so beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing all these thoughts. You brought me to the brink of tears multiple times. And I don't know, maybe I'm just having an off day where I'm feeling extra emotional. But again, I I really think that these stories are sacred. And I'm always really honored when people are able to come on and share it to the little Project Zion audience. And I don't take that that

lightly. So thank you for trusting us with your story. So I again, I just want to thank you for sharing with us. And I do know that you have written a little poem about your faith transition story. So if you would like I would love to have you read it just to finish us off.

Elle Mills Warner 1:02:58

Yeah. So this is a poem that I wrote several months ago when I was really feeling the the sense of homecoming that I talked about earlier. I ran from the red brick, I ran from the bishop, and from bread and water on silver trays. I ran from the prophet. I ran from the 12 and from their voices of judgment and hate. I ran from my neighbors, I ran from my family, and from revelations from the clouds. I ran from golden plates, I ran from seers and stones. I ran from granite spires soaring into the sky. I ran from brother Joseph, I ran from father Young and from the browser and with their wounding tongues. I ran from Kolob and from Abraham's book, I ran from the Savior and His Father Elohim. I ran from garments. I ran from Jehovah and from the priesthood, the people like me. I ran and I ran away from those mountains. I ran and I ran, I looked for a home. I met strangers who became my family. I ran I ran, but no place was home. I ran and I ran and ran, but there was nowhere left to go. I ran from my people, and a past which haunts me. I ran and I ran trying to escape. And now here I stand before my people once again. I don't have any shame and they hear my voice. There are no conditions. They only want me there's just one revelation. It is God's perfect love. I ran and I ran. I ran right to them.

Brittany Mangelson 1:05:06

That was beautiful and so well encapsulated the story that you just shared with us. So, thank you so much,

Elle Mills Warner 1:05:16

thank you for having me.

Josh Mangelson 1:05:26

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