

Josh Mangelson 00:17

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

Brittany Mangelson 00:33

Hello, everyone, welcome to *Project Zion Podcast*. This is Brittany Mangelson, and I'm going to be your host for today. And I feel like I say this every single time, but I'm really excited about this week's episode, and we are doing one of my favorite interviews to do, which are our "Fair Trade" interviews, which are all about faith transitions. So, today we have on my friend, Michelle Wilde, who was just recently baptized and confirmed into the Salt Lake City congregation, and we are going to be talking about her faith transition, and what faith looked like growing up, and what brought her to Community of Christ as well as her, some of her hopes for Community of Christ as well. So, Michelle, thank you for being on the podcast.

Michelle Wilde 01:18

Thanks for having me. I'm excited.

Brittany Mangelson 01:21

I'm excited too and really, when I say just baptized and confirmed, I mean, like, the week before last. So, Michelle, let's start just with some basic information. Why don't you introduce yourself to our audience. Just tell us a little bit about you, maybe where you live, just general location, what you do, etc., etc.

Michelle Wilde 01:46

So, I live in Ogden, Utah, which is north of Salt Lake City. I have two boys who are 12 and nine, and I work as an office manager for a speech and occupational therapy clinic here in Layton.

Brittany Mangelson 02:06

Awesome, thank you. And now, let's just dive into your faith story. We're gonna get to know a lot more about you. So, I'm curious to know what faith and religion looked like for you growing up. Were you active in church? How important was God and spirituality in your formative years? Just walk us through whatever you want about being a kid, and faith, and church.

Michelle Wilde 02:38

So, when people, I tried to describe my childhood to people, we were extra-Mormon. So, we were, every Sunday, we had family home evening. We had scripture study. We talked about church. We watched church movies. My parents are very orthodox. They are very excited about the end of times, second coming, prepping for the millennium type of Mormons, and my childhood was really magical, like, I really loved church. And my parents and I, I'm the oldest daughter of five daughters, so I have four younger sisters, and I was the problem child growing up. My sisters describe me as caring but bossy, and that got me in trouble with my parents a lot. But I found at church a lot of acceptance and

excitement about, like, what a know-it-all I was about church stuff. And so, I always really loved church. We were very into family history. Most of my ancestors are Mormon pioneers who were in Nauvoo. I don't really have any earlier than Nauvoo, but we were in Nauvoo and early Utah polygamous families. Our claim to fame is my great, one of my great-great something grandmothers was the first woman to be baptized in Norway and came across the plains, and she was the, one of the many wives of Archibald Gardner, if you've been to Gardener Village. That's my ancestors. So, I grew up in Los Angeles though, and then we moved to Utah when I was 13, so.

Brittany Mangelson 04:52

I have heard of Gardner Village and Josh and I, when our twins were super, super teeny babies, we lived, just right across the street, and so, I would just take our little double stroller and walk around, and that is, yeah, kind of a fun, little Utah, very Utah specific connection, but our Utah folks will definitely know what you're talking about. So, it sounds like you were all in, like, church worked for you. Church was not only your belief system, but your culture. I'm assuming that, even living in Los Angeles, you still, well, you probably had that identity almost even instilled in you more so because it made you stick out amongst your peers, which I know can be, kind of, intense when you're not in Utah, surrounded by a bunch of LDS folks. But it sounds like it worked for you, and that you enjoyed church and enjoyed that part of your identity and your heritage. So, when you moved to Utah, was that like a huge culture shock, because Utah and LA are very different?

Michelle Wilde 06:00

Yeah, it was a really difficult move. So, I was in about six, between sixth and seventh grade when we moved from Los Angeles to Midway, Utah.

Brittany Mangelson 06:15

Wow.

Michelle Wilde 06:16

At that time was extremely rural. It's grown a lot since then, but it was really difficult, because almost, well, almost everyone was Mormon, and that's one of the reasons we moved back. My parents didn't want, I was going into middle school. They didn't want me going to middle school and high school in LA where it was supposedly really scary. And then we moved to Utah, and everyone already had their, like, friend group that they went to church with, and they went to school with. And I basically spent four years, like, on the outside. It was pretty rough.

Brittany Mangelson 06:58

Yeah, that would be rough. And gosh, when you said that Midway has grown a lot, it's funny 'cause, like, it has, it definitely has from when we were growing up, but I would still consider it pretty rural, like, it still is not huge.

Michelle Wilde 07:12

We have a stoplight now, so, that was a big deal when that stoplight went in.

Brittany Mangelson 07:20

Oh, goodness, but going, I mean, even going from, you know, LA to Salt Lake would be a huge culture change. And, you know, that's, like, massive city to semi-big city, comparatively. So, to go to Midway, that's intense. And then, yeah, being on the outside, because you didn't grow up with these kids, and they already had their established friend groups, etc. But to be excluded from that, that's probably not what your parents would have wanted for you. Sounds like that's the opposite of the outcome that they were hoping for. So, in high school, though, were you, did, you know, remain active and do the whole seminary thing? I'm assuming so just because I know a little bit about your story. But, yeah, just walk us, keep walking us through.

Michelle Wilde 08:12

I was the, kind of like, middle school and high schooler that my, a friend and I, we had a contest to see who could finish the Mormon fiction series *Work and the Glory* the soonest. And so, whenever the new *Work and the Glory* would come out, we would both race to the bookstore, and, like, read it. And for people who might not be familiar with what *Work and the Glory* is, it's these huge novels. And there's eight, seven or eight of them, and it goes to fictional, it's a story about a fictional family from, Joseph Smith, they supposedly know Joseph Smith in his early days and followed him all the way through the martyrdom, and then they traveled to Utah. And it's this big saga of this Mormon family. And so, that's how I was, yeah. And I went to seminary. We ended up moving back to LA for my junior and senior year of high school. And so, I did early morning seminary for two years.

Brittany Mangelson 09:24

So, I, people won't be able to see my face, but I was grinning from ear to ear and laughing on mute because I feel like, you know, when people talk about what, kind of, you know, quote, unquote, "what kind of Mormon they were growing up", there's different layers of intensity and *Work and the Glory* Mormonism is, like, *Mormonism*, you know? It's, like, you're in, but you're *in*. Knowing that not only were you into *Work and the Glory*, and I'm not making fun of you because I did, I have read a few of the books. I did not read the whole series, but just knowing that not only were you into *Work and the Glory*, but that you raced to the bookstore to be able to get the newest one that was out and to read it as a race. That is dedication.

Michelle Wilde 10:13

And that's what I was doing in high school, so.

Brittany Mangelson 10:15

Yeah, I mean, that's, that is impressive. And I mean, again, I'm not making fun of you, because I was the type of kid that went and did baptisms for the dead every single week for a while, like, for years. So, I was definitely right there with you. The, a, *Work and the Glory*, man. Those are, those are something else. So, Michelle, I know that you went on a mission, but before we get to that, I just want to ask, you know, during growing up, it does sound like you had a really net positive experience within the church. But did you ever, were you able to identify doubts, whether they were theological or cultural, or you stated pretty plainly that you did feel left out when you moved to Utah and your friend groups? But did any of that impact, you know, your actual faith or your testimony, as an LDS person would say, did you doubt that ever?

Michelle Wilde 11:15

There were little seeds here and there. Actually, reading the *Work and the Glory*, they talk about, in the Nauvoo period, Joseph Smith is being accused of practicing polygamy, and so, I went, and I talked to my mom about it, and she said, "Yeah, Joseph Smith practiced polygamy." And I was, like, really disturbed about, not just that Joseph Smith had practiced it, about the whole, it was the first time I thought about it, in general, and my mom was like, "Well, you're just gonna have to pray about it, and I can't really give you any other, like, explanation or answer. It's going to have to come from God." And so, I did pray about it, and I never really got any kind of feeling or confirmation that made me feel okay with it. And so, that was a shelf item that, you know, I just was, like, I'm gonna put that on the shelf and worry about that later. I'm only, like, I'm a young kid, and maybe it's not the time. And then, the other thing that just, kind of, always created was, so my mom is very faithful, but she's also very independent, and very intelligent. And just because of the nature of his job, my dad was away for a good portion of my childhood, would travel and be home only, like, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, especially in my, like, middle school, high school years. We didn't really see my dad very much. And we had five girls, and so, it was like this house of women, and very independent, very free-thinking mom, who also wanted to be really orthodox. So, there was always this, like, tension between those two things. And I got a lot of mixed messages, both from my parents and from the church, because I was really smart, and I was considered really capable and a good reader. And I always felt held back in those things and not able to express them fully. There was always limits on it, I felt, and even when my parents were talking to me about college, I was like, "Well, I want to go and study comparative religion and get, like, a master's degree." And they were like, "Well, how about you become a dental hygienist so that you can, like, have kids, and, you know, work part-time." My mom always worked part-time. She was a nurse, but it was always, she worked night shift, she worked weekends, so that we were never, like, in daycare, which was really, like, the worst thing that you could possibly do besides not having kids. So, there was just a lot of tension between, like, what I felt like my calling and gifts were, and not being able to, like, really express that. And I saw my mom struggle with that too, even though she never said it.

Brittany Mangelson 14:19

That's really interesting, having a house full of women and a dad who was out a lot and recognizing, you know, my mom is strong, she's intelligent, she's capable, but then maybe to not get that acknowledged at church in the same way, or just, you know, to be seen as, quote, unquote, "the head of her own household", that kind of thing. Like, that would be, I mean, that goes against the narrative that's really, really pushed in young girls faces weekly, every single week, and so that, have a family that, like, fits that mold, but is trying really hard to fit that mold, and maybe a more liberated model of respect and authority and autonomy could have been helpful. Yeah, that obviously would be impactful, for sure. So, now, I know you went on a mission. So, let's move into that period of your life; college, mission, just wherever you want to take it.

Michelle Wilde 15:24

I did want to mention one thing that happened shortly before I graduated high school, that's, kind of, that tension of my, like, what I now see as my budding feminism. When I had my patriarchal blessing, my patriarch blessed me that I would be a leader in the church. And I was like, "Great", like, "I am all on board for that." And then that was part of, like, the actual blessing. Then afterwards, when he was

talking to me, he very gently took my hands, this sweet little old man, and he said, "Wasn't that wonderful. Maybe one day you can be a bishop's wife."

Brittany Mangelson 16:01

Ohhh.

Michelle Wilde 16:03

And, I actually was, like, what? I don't know, that was not really what I was thinking, but okay.

Brittany Mangelson 16:08

Oh, that's so sad because there really are, you know, some leadership opportunities for women, obviously, not as many as for men, but to then be resigned to being the wife of a leader. Man, I'm sorry.

Michelle Wilde 16:21

It was funny. No, looking back on it, it's funny. But, yeah, so, my mom really encouraged all of us to serve missions. So, out of my five sisters, three of us went on missions. She went on a mission, when it was really uncommon. She went to Colombia, on her mission in the '80s, and I was called to Independence, Missouri. And I almost didn't go on my mission because I was really upset I didn't get to go. Actually, I had spent a semester, my senior year of high school, I spent in Russia, and I was really not, like, gonna get to go back to Russia. And I always think, well my mission, but, and I don't even have a problem with the visitor center, which I wasn't super excited about, because I felt like it wasn't a real, like, mission. But I didn't want to be a tour guide, so.

Brittany Mangelson 17:15

I mean, that's fair, not a lot of our listeners are in Independence, obviously, but from, going from spending time in Russia, and you're right, like, there is this hope that you're going to go somewhere exotic, and you're going to meet, you know, a totally different culture, and you're going to learn a different language and eat different food and then get, to get called to somewhere in the Midwest, that's just a few states over, and then to go and, a visitor center so you're not necessarily knocking doors like a traditional mission would be. I mean, I could definitely see the letdown of that, for sure. But overall, how was your mission?

Michelle Wilde 17:55

It was hard. It was really hard. It was not what I expected. And I don't know that it was any particular person's fault on my mission. Like, I loved my mission president and our leaders, for the most part. I'm an introvert and being with a companion, and having to talk to people that I didn't know in ways that made them visibly uncomfortable, day in and day out, was really difficult. For me, it was really draining. There were parts of it that I loved. It actually turned out to be a really great mission for me because I have always loved church history, *Work and the Glory* nerd, I get to go to Independence, so, all this church history. And most missionary, most LDS missionaries are discouraged for reading or even forbidden from reading any books besides, there's a set, five missionary set of books that they give you that you can read. But on our mission we were encouraged to go to the basement of the Independence Visitor Center where there's a library and read as much as we could about church history. And there's actually, they have books from most of the other Restoration groups in the basement. So, I read books

from Community of Christ. I read books from Church of Christ Temple Lot, and a lot of the other groups while I was there, and that was really fun. And we got to go on a tour of the Community of Christ Temple, and it was fascinating. So, it was also really hard because when you're in the MTC, they would teach us, if you teach someone that *The Book of Mormon* is true, if they believe *The Book of Mormon* is true, then they will know that Joseph Smith was a prophet, and then they will join the church. And nobody in the MTC taught me what to expect when you go to Independence, Missouri and you knock on somebody's door, and they start yelling at you about how Brigham Young, like, ruined Joseph Smith's name, and was a liar and, like, stole their church from them. And you're just, like, I don't know what to do now. I'm gonna slowly back away. These cute little, like, you know, aging Community of Christ ladies were so upset at me.

Brittany Mangelson 20:40

Oh, my goodness, that is, I'm obviously laughing, but it's true, and here's the thing. We have had people, my family, my husband and I have had people say, "Well, if you just read *The Book of Mormon* and pray about it, then you'll know that the LDS church is true." And they don't know what to do when we say, "Well, Community of Christ still has *The Book of Mormon*." We, like, we could pray about *The Book of Mormon*, to know if it's, quote, unquote, "true", and be led to Community of Christ. So, not that Community of Christ leads with that at all, but the logic doesn't make sense from an LDS perspective, because that's a huge leap to go from whatever you think about *The Book of Mormon* to what you think about the modern-day LDS church. So, my heart goes out to all the missionaries that have been in Independence, or who are currently in Independence.

Michelle Wilde 21:37

Yeah, you really never know what you're gonna get 'cause, like, we also got people who, I had one gentleman come to the door with a shotgun, and...

Brittany Mangelson 21:45

Oh, my gosh.

Michelle Wilde 21:45

...that he, his ancestors chased my ancestors out of Missouri, and did he have to do it again?

Brittany Mangelson 21:53

Noooo, that's scary.

Michelle Wilde 22:55

Yeah. It was really scary.

Brittany Mangelson 21:58

Yikes. So, you did go door to door even though you were at the Visitor Center. You did...

Michelle Wilde 22:01

Yes. Well, what happened was the Visitor Center was being remodeled when I first got there, so I spent my first year in, around Kansas City. And then, once we, the Visitor Center was remodeled, we would be in it for half a day and then proselyting for the other half.

Brittany Mangelson 22:22

So, you did get some door-to-door experience, and yeah, gosh, that sounds terrifying. And I just wanted to say that Josh and I were just recently having a conversation about how difficult missions would be for an introvert because the only time that you're supposed to not be away from your companion is when you're in the bathroom, and even then, it's, like, your companion's right there, and, you know, sharing the same room. You share all your meals together. I mean, there's never any chance for you to be alone. So, yeah, just compounding all of that, and. I just, I didn't go on a mission, and I'm grateful because I think it would have been so hard, so hard.

Michelle Wilde 23:11

A lot of returned missionaries, when they very first get home, they are really homesick for their mission. And while I appreciated a lot of the things about my mission, I never felt that. I was home. I was glad for it to be done.

Brittany Mangelson 23:26

Yeah. Have you been back to Independence since your mission?

Michelle Wilde 23:28

I have not. I'm really hoping I get to go for Conference, for World Conference coming up because I was in Independence in between World Conferences, so I've never been there for that.

Brittany Mangelson 23:41

Yeah. What kind of visitors did you get at the Visitor Center? I mean, I think I know because I was one of those youth that went on tour as a child. But did you get a lot of Community of Christ folks or Restoration folks? Or were they mostly LDS people that came to the actual Visitor Center?

Michelle Wilde 23:59

Mostly LDS, it's mostly LDS families going on a church history tour. Also, all of the missionaries in the area use it. They bring their investigators there and will do lessons and tours with the people who are learning about the LDS church. A lot of, like, youth groups would come for their weeknight activities or their Sun-, a Sunday activity. When we, right after it was remodeled, we had a big, grand opening and invited the leaders of all the other area churches to come. So, we, and we got to do those tours, which was really fun, and a little scary.

Brittany Mangelson 24:52

Yeah. And a little scary. That makes sense. So, I just have to ask, did you ever have an inkling that you would someday join the big church across the street? I don't know if you would have considered Community of Christ an apostate church at the time. I've been open about this on the podcast for myself, but when I went to Independence for the first time, I scoffed at our Temple, Community of Christ

Temple, because I just thought, "You know, apostasy. We are the one true church. This group doesn't know anything. They don't have the truth. They're poor lost souls." Like, I was a really arrogant, very good Mormon. So, I'm just wondering if you, on your mission, just right across the street, had any sort of inkling or curiosity? I mean, I think you said that it was a little bit intriguing, but what were your general thoughts about Community of Christ at the time?

Michelle Wilde 25:48

I was very interested, and a lot, so I actually taught, as a missionary, several people and families who were disenchanted with Community of Christ and changes that had been made that started when women were ordained, and then the name change. And they were, it's very interesting how similar it is to LDS seekers. Like, there was a lot of family pressure to stay in, to not, especially to not go to another church, but not, especially, to go to Mormon church. And so, they would, like, secretly invite us into their house, and we had to, like, keep it all under wraps to teach them. I was really intrigued and interested about how they made changes to the church, especially at World Conference. That was really interesting to me, a little bit scary that, like, everyone just got together and talked about stuff and didn't have, like, the Prophet just telling them what to do. When I first got to Independence, we actually went on a tour of the Temple. All the missionaries are supposed to go on a tour when they first get there, so they, kind of, know what's going on. And at the beginning of the tour, there was, I don't know if they still use it, but there was a video where we were intro-, just, like, an introduction. And we were sitting there, and they were showing the different sacraments, and it showed a baptism being performed by a woman, and I had the most, like, physical reaction to that. And at the time, I was, I thought, well, I even wrote in my journal, this must be, like, "the absence of the Spirit", I think, is what I wrote, like, confirming to me that this is not true, because it was so shocking, because I knew that women performed the sacraments, but I didn't, I had never seen it. And, like, it was a very, I could feel it through my whole body. And that experience never left me. I have a very different view of it now. But, yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 28:24

No, it is, it is shocking. And when you've been told, you know, that women, when *you* only have one role, and you are essentially representing your denomination, as a minister, as a missionary, but those limits and boundaries are so set in stone, and you know exactly where the line is, of what is, quote, unquote, "of God" and what is quote, unquote, "not of God", to see something that just blows that line out of the, just, like, that's, that is shocking. I mean, I remember seeing similar images and feeling, you know, similar things. And, yeah, it can be. And I think that a lot of the undercurrent of that is fear, right? I mean, both you and I have now, you know, come into Community of Christ officially, and, like you said, you have very different feelings now, but there's still, like, that fear when you first encounter it, and that, I know, at least speaking for myself, like, I think that that's a lot of what those emotions were. So, let's just keep telling the story, whether you want to keep telling a few more mission stories or move beyond your mission and when you got home. I am curious to know, you know, when you think your faith transition really began, but whatever you need to tell to get us to that point, go for it.

Michelle Wilde 29:52

So, I got home from my mission, and within six months of getting home I was married to my now ex-husband, who, we had known each other before our missions. And so, we wrote letters for three years, and then there's a lot of pressure on me to get married. I was, I'm from a big family on both sides. I

have a lot of cousins my age, and all of the cousins who were my age, and most of the ones that were in the, two years younger than me, were married and already having kids by the time I got home from my mission.

Brittany Mangelson 30:32

And at the time you would have been, 'cause I know mission ages have changed, but you would have been, 20-

Michelle Wilde 30:39

I was 23 when I got home.

Brittany Mangelson 30:42

Sorry, I cut you off. You were...

Michelle Wilde 30:43

I was 23.

Brittany Mangelson 30:44

23, okay.

Michelle Wilde 30:47

And I just felt really old. I felt like I was ancient, and I had never really dated. I was particularly awkward, and, in high school, and a little nerdy, so I've never dated a ton. And I felt like I was, like, if I didn't get married soon, like, that was, I would be single forever. And I needed to get on with the plan and get married. We were really good friends, and we had written letters to each other, and we were ready to get married. So, we got married. He joined the Army National Guard, and we went out to Monterey, California for his training, and we were there for two years, and we were in California during Prop Eight. And I think that that experience was another, like, chink in the armor, or really heavy shelf experience. It did not feel good about what we were doing, but I went along with it because that's what we were supposed to do. And I didn't say anything to anybody or, like, pushback in any way, but it felt really yucky, and it was really disturbing to me. But we came back to Utah. Fast forward to about 2010. We had just had our second baby, Riker. And so, my ex-husband went out of the, on a study abroad and left me home with two little babies, working part-time while he was out. And while he was gone, he, is when his faith crisis started. And it was so intense that I ended up flying to the country where he was and bringing him home. And that was a really rough period. From about 2010 to 2013, he was going through his faith crisis, and I was the model [inaudible], faithful, spouse. During that time, our younger son was also diagnosed with autism, and we went through some unemployment periods, so it was pretty rough there for a while. And we decided that we could make it work even though we, again, even though my ex was really upset about the church and didn't want me to go, I ended up going, kept going anyway, until about 2014, which is when all these rumblings started happening in the LDS church about women's issues. And I was in the car one day, listening to the local public radio station. There's a program called "Radio West" here in Utah, and they were interviewing women, and I believe that they were, interview-, talking about ordained women. And I got so angry in the car there. I was raging. I was crying. I was so angry at these women who we're trying to, I felt like they were trying to destroy my

church. And so, I took a little breath, because I've learned in my life that when I get super angry about something, it's probably because there's an issue there that I haven't dealt with. So, I thought about it and I realized, as I made myself listen to this whole program, and then I went on to the "Ordain Women" website and I, like, looked at all the stuff, and I just broke down crying again, because I realized the reason I was so angry is that they're, on the issue, all the issues that they were bringing up, were things that I had been denying were bothering me, and that I was actually one of them. And that was really scary, because now I was on the outside, and now, I was the other, and now I was the person that I was afraid of. And I tried for two years after that to stay in and to make the changes from inside. And I had, like, three callings and I went to hair, I went to church with purple hair, and pants, and I taught young women about Heavenly Mother and that was an interesting time.

Brittany Mangelson 36:03

You gave it such a solid effort, though.

Michelle Wilde 36:05

I really did.

Brittany Mangelson 36:07

I just bounced right out of there, because I did not feel like I could do anything to change it from the inside, I just didn't. I look at people like you, especially women like you, and marginalized genders and orientations, people in the LGBTQ community that are trying to make change from within, and I just have such admiration for the amount of bravery that folks like you have that I did not. I mean, it's a lot. It's a lot to find yourself inside of an institution, and yet on the outside. And the names that those women were called. I mean, for our listeners, wearing pants to church literally got people death threats, got women death threats. And it's a big deal, and it's a huge act of protest, which is mind boggling, but it is. And so, to be able to stay in a community while pushing back from the inside, when that's what's happening to you, I mean, I tip my hat to you, Michelle, 'cause, like I said, I just bounced right out of there. It was too scary. It was too, too scary.

Michelle Wilde 37:24

I was really fortunate, I think, to have a very supportive ward. You know, I talked to my bishop about a lot of this stuff. And I, bless the Young Women's presidency hearts. I was in Young Women's, was my calling, and they didn't really know half of the stuff I was talking about, but they were just like, "Okay," like, "Oh, this, just, Michelle's just the way she is." And they let me teach. I taught youth Sunday school, and I taught Laurels, and I had some really unconventional lessons, and the other leaders would come up and tell me, "I never thought of that and never heard of that before." So, it was fun. I was also trying to wrangle my younger son who hated church. And doing it all while my husband was home on Sundays. So, I think that they extended a lot of grace to me because they knew that there was a lot of other things going on in my life too.

Brittany Mangelson 38:37

That makes sense. And kudos to your ward for being as supportive as they could be. So, what was your breaking point? What was, I guess, the moment that made you realize, I need to take a step back,

whether that was a permanent in step back, or start exploring other religions or no religion at all? But what was that moment for you?

Michelle Wilde 39:02

There were two big ones. The one was, actually, I read your profile on “Ordain Women”.

Brittany Mangelson 39:10

Oh, I didn't know that.

Michelle Wilde 39:14

And I don't know if you mentioned Community of Christ in that profile, or if I followed you in, on social media after that, but, somehow through you, you mentioned Community of Christ. And I said, “Wait. I know those people. Let me look at what they're doing.” And so, I jumped on the website, and I was like, “Alright, let's figure out what this is all about.” So, that was one thing when I started the, like, really digging into. I was on that website a lot before I ever showed up. And that was before there was really any kind of online, like, Facebook groups that I knew of, or could find, or would feel comfortable joining. So, it was mostly just me, like, secretly looking on the website and closing the tab really quickly before anybody came.

Brittany Mangelson 40:12

I know that well.

Michelle Wilde 40:17

Yeah, and then the other thing that happened around that time was someone who was very, very close to me, who I had always suspected had some differences. They came out to me, and in the context of, they had just broken up with their partner of over a year. And they had not told me they were with this person at all, because they were afraid of how I would react. And it just, like, I had always, kind of, said, as a joke to my husband, “If so and so ever comes out to me, I'll leave the church.” And then they did. And I was so, one of the reasons I had stayed in and tried to make it work was I had another young man in my Sunday school class that I was pretty sure was gay, and I wanted to make sure that I was the one teaching him Sunday school and not somebody else. And I thought, like, if I worked hard enough, if I was, like, walked that line between faithful and progressive well enough, that somehow my little contribution could make some difference in this, like, organization that was hurting people that I knew and I loved. And when this person called me, and came out, and told me that they had broken up with her partner and how sad they were and alone they felt, I was just, like, I can't, I cannot keep doing this where people think that I'm supporting things that I don't believe in, and it's hurting people that I love.

Brittany Mangelson 42:12

I had a similar break, that emotional break, where you realize, at what point for me, like, at what point was I a hypocrite because I was critiquing the institution, but I was part of the institution, and I was teaching in the institution, and I was upholding the policies, and the practices, and the culture of the institution. And so, I couldn't...

Michelle Wilde 42:35

Giving them money, and time, and...

Brittany Mangelson 43:37

Yes, yes, exactly. I was donating. And I was making sure that I had a temple recommend and doing all the things and I did not feel like I could live with integrity and do that. So, it sounds like our emotional breaks were very similar in that way. So, you were low key, checking out Community of Christ, like...

Michelle Wilde 43:03

Yeah. So, the first time we went was in, it was actually Racial Justice Day in 2017, and we attended, mostly me, but my ex and our kids sometimes attended Community of Christ and the LDS church on and off for about a year. Like, we'd, some Sundays we go to both and some, certain days we go to one and not the other. But, yeah, it was, that first experience was really interesting.

Brittany Mangelson 43:41

How was it? I mean, because by that point, I had been with the Congregation for a few years, and so, I think that, you know, kind of, just becomes old news in a way, like, the new things, like, you forget that they're really new to people, but like, what were some of the things that you immediately noticed or that were striking or memorable?

Michelle Wilde 44:02

One, it might be a little petty, but the benches are super uncomfortable and the church is cold in Salt Lake.

Brittany Mangelson 44:11

It's true. Both of those things are true.

Michelle Wilde 44:17

And, you know, there's not, there's not nearly as many people there as they are in an LDS ward. And so, you, kind of, stand out. You can't really blend in, and it was Racial Justice Day, and so, we had a guest, there was a guest on, preacher that year. And so, it's a very different message than you're going to get in any LDS ward on that Sunday. So, it was just, it was a lot of new and a lot of, like. You know, you walk into almost any LDS chapel and there's only so many, like, floorplans that they use, and if, they all smell the same, and they all look the same, and they all feel the same, and it was just a lot of new.

Brittany Mangelson 45:10

Yeah, I can see how that would be alarming, maybe, but, like, in a good way, maybe in a curious way. But, every once in a while, when we have, you know, our out of the norm services, I almost want to make sure that people know, like, this isn't our usual, like, it's good, but it's not our usual. So, I don't know if anybody told you that that day, but I'm glad you kept coming back.

Michelle Wilde 45:40

Yeah, I don't want it, like, sorry. When I share that, I'd been praying and, like, working and, like, trying to figure this out, and I really wanted, like, the heavens to part and to feel this, like, overwhelming, like, "this is where you're supposed to be" answer, and I didn't get it. I didn't feel bad. I didn't feel like this is not where you're supposed to be, but it was just, kind of, like, okay. The thing that really got me though, was the hymnbook. Yeah, I, especially the hymns that we sang that Sunday. And if I had to pick one thing that kept me coming back, it was the hymns.

Brittany Mangelson 46:23

Yeah, well, I'm glad that you were able to articulate that and to verbalize that, because I think that I was feeling something similar, and I think a lot of seekers are feeling something similar. They think that they're going to have this big life changing experience, or that, you know, they're not going to be, maybe, triggered at all, or that it's going to be, you know, this great community that has all their ducks in a row that, you know, can figure out how to warm their sanctuary to a comfortable temperature, but that it doesn't, it's not going to be perfect, and it's not going to be, it's going to be new and probably a little scary and different, and maybe a little alarming. I mean, these are all words that I would use to describe my first, you know, several experiences with Community of Christ. And I think that, you know, Mormons, those of us who grew up LDS, I was always under the impression that if you, you know, felt the Spirit, then it was going to be obvious, and it was going to be, you know, like this moment where you knew that whatever you were doing or encountering was true or right, or of God, or whatever label you want to put it, put on it. But I didn't necessarily feel that to that degree, the first time, the first several times or, I mean, really ever in Community of Christ, right? Like, I've never had this, like, "Oh, this church is the best", like, and this, you know, like, big spiritual experience. Like, I just feel content with where I'm at, and just, like, a softer affirmation that what I'm doing is right. So, I really appreciate that you brought that up because I do wonder if some people just have their expectations not necessarily met, because they're expecting some sort of big brouhaha moment where, you know, God is shaking their shoulders and saying, like, you need to stick with this community, when in reality, I don't think that that happens. Maybe it does for some people, but I think it happens less often than what LDS folks expect, if that makes sense. So, you said the first time that you came to Community of Christ was in 2017, and you were just recently baptized and confirmed. So, talk to us about that, just your time journeying with Community of Christ. You know, what kind of hang ups did you have? What were the things, you know, that kept you coming back year after year? Just what led you to decide to become a member?

Michelle Wilde 49:16

So, in 2018, we moved, we were in West Jordan, Utah, which is a lot closer to the Salt Lake City congregation, and we moved to Ogden. And that move was probably one of the most difficult experiences of my life. Even though I wasn't super orthodox Mormon at the time, I was very close to my ward and my neighbors. I had a job that I loved, and we moved, and I had to quit my job. And I wasn't near my friends and a lot of things happened all at once. And so, part of the not joining right away was just logistical, because I think probably, I knew pretty early on that this was what I wanted, but I didn't want to, I wanted to get baptized when I could be, like, a physical part of the congregation and be like, in the congregational life, and it just wasn't really an option, partly because we're so far away. My ex did not feel comfortable at Community of Christ and did not want that to be his spiritual home, and so we

did spend quite a while checking out, we went to the Unitarians. We went to, like, Praise Jesus on Your Feet Rock Band Church. We went to, we tried out a few different things, trying to find somewhere that we could both be happy and feel our, we went to some, like, atheist groups. We went to a post-Mormon support group. We did a lot of different things. We also went to the Ogden congregation, which they're super sweet and wonderful, and we did that for a little while too. But mostly it was the logistics of driving down to Salt Lake City from Ogden, is a long drive, and, yeah. So, that was a big hang up. Another one, honestly, is my family is very, very Mormon, and my parents, I knew, would take my decision very personally, as a personal and parental failure on their part, that they had done something wrong. And I wanted to just be really sure that I could commit. I wanted to make sure that, like, so, you know, on the website and the Enduring Principles, it all sounds great, and I wanted to make sure that it was what I thought it was, too, so. And, honestly, you guys don't really push people to get baptized. Like, if somebody had, like, pushed me a little bit, it might have happened a little sooner. I basically had to be like, "All right. Like, when is this gonna happen?"

Brittany Mangelson 52:46

And I can't decide if that's a blessing or a curse, honestly, I can't. And I think that, especially in the Salt Lake congregation, we are so nervous to be seen as quote, unquote, "missionaries", right, and we don't want to push people away. But there have been several people that are, like, "Hey, is anybody gonna ask me? Like, I've been here for several years?" And I would put you in that camp. So, but it makes sense. And I mean, when you're used to, I mean, here in Utah, having a church basically on your corner and having that be your social community. You know, Ogden is quite a ways. It's about an hour north of Salt Lake.

Michelle Wilde 53:31

Yeah, it takes us about 45 minutes to get from my apartment to the church.

Brittany Mangelson 53:36

Okay. Yeah. So, yeah, it's a commitment, and when you've got...

Michelle Wilde 53:41

When it's not snowing.

Brittany Mangelson 53:41

Yeah, exactly. And gosh, that drive when it's snowing, it's not in a great location for snow. So, totally, absolutely makes sense. So, I am curious to know, as you were seeking, what kind of things you have been able to do and be involved with in Community of Christ as, kind of, a long-time seeker?

Michelle Wilde 54:07

One of the first things that we did that we really loved was my older son and I were able to help out when we did the breakfast at the youth shelter. And that was really neat to be a part of that. But then just to be asked to, like, participate in worship services and say, "Yes", and not, like, will you do this? I'm like, I don't really know what that means. But, yes, if you help me out, I will do it and show up. I am a, can be a little reserved, and so, I maybe haven't have had as many opportunities to, like, participate in things except for, I, about a year ago now, I asked, I reached out to Carla our pastor, and I told her,

“Okay, like, I've been thinking about this forever. I want to start preparing for baptism, and I want to do something in the congregation. What do you want me to do?” And she was, like, “I don't know, what do you want to do?” “Oh, great. Well, I really miss teaching.” And so, I started later in the year, it hasn't been a whole year, but I started teaching Sunday school, which has been really fun. And so, we've gone through the Latter-day Seeker book *Conceiving God*, which was probably, looking back, one of the most important things I read in my faith transition, because it completely destroyed, like, any certainty I had about who, what, if God was, and to be able to read that and, kind of, put something back together again that felt good, and felt like I was connected in a belonging to the Divine. And so, using that book to teach Sunday school has been super fun.

Brittany Mangelson 56:11

It has been fun. I've been taking that class, and it's been great. And I would agree that that was one of the most transformative text resources that I used during my faith transition as well. And I'm still continually, I don't know, surprised every time I go through it, or sit through one of your classes, that I really do feel like I learned something new, which feels like a very cliché Mormon phrase to say, like, every time you do this, like you learn something new, but it's true. Just the fact that my understanding and concept of God can shift so much even, I mean, I've said this before, but like, the God that I was worshipping, and believed in, and experienced at the beginning of my time in Community of Christ is a different God than now, right? Like, it, and it can be something that continually evolved, and you don't have to have all the right answers. And I really think that that book, kind of, leads you down that path of just being okay with untangling certainty, which is something that Latter-day Seekers need, so.

Michelle Wilde 57:22

Just give me the new answer. I don't like the old one. I just want a new answer. And all you get are more questions.

Brittany Mangelson 57:30

Seriously. And that's scary, but it's also so liberating. And, yeah, you know, I'm preaching to the choir there, but.

Michelle Wilde 57:43

Then being, like, asked, so, and then Carla asked me to, like, plan worship, and I was like, wait, what? You remember, I'm not, like, a member? And she just, like, “I know, I'm sorry. Just, like, plan the worship service.” And I've been doing that once a month for the past few months. And it's, I don't know, it's really fun.

Brittany Mangelson 58:04

Yeah, I love planning worship services, and the fact that you can do it as a non-member. That's when I always, I often say, you know, I was doing more in Community of Christ as a non-member than I ever could have done as a Mormon woman, if I would have stayed in the LDS church. And that's what I'm talking about. Like, there's not a single woman that plans a worship service for a whole congregation. Like, that does not, women are not allowed to do that. And so, the fact that you could do that, as a woman, before you're even a member, is huge. And I think that we don't necessarily give that opportunity, the excitement that it deserves, because it's big. It's a big job. It's a big deal. And so, I just

love that that can happen in Community of Christ and that you can form and shape the worship experience for the entire congregation before you're even a member. It's so cool.

Michelle Wilde 59:03

I know, I keep looking around me. I kept looking around me, like, are you guys sure I'm allowed to do this? Like, wait, what is she doing? Yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 59:12

Amazing, amazing. So, I am curious to know, you seemed to have a lot of support when you were baptized and confirmed. I sadly had to watch the service on Zoom because I was confirming someone else remotely at the exact same time, but I did have it on, and it seemed like you had a lot of support. So, what did telling your family and friends look like? And, you know, what were their general reactions and responses to you joining Community of Christ?

Michelle Wilde 59:45

So, I'm very close with my sisters, and we're all at varying levels of membership in the LDS church, and they had known that this was something I had been doing, and so, they were all really excited for me. And two of my sisters, who live close enough to come, came and supported me, and my nephews, which was really fun. And then, most of my friends here in Ogden are part of a post-Mormon support group, and so, when, they've always been really, I think I'm the only one that is religious still out of our group. And they've always been very curious about why I would want to go to church after this experience, and why I would want to go to Community of Christ in particular, and for the most part, respectful, but just really, like, what are you doing? And why are you doing this again? And, like, a lot of questions. So, I've been answering questions about Community of Christ for a while now. And so, a lot of the folks that came to my baptism are from that group to support me, which was really neat. They did joke with me afterwards. They're, like, "So, when are you gonna be ordained an elder? And I was, like, that's not how it works because they're, you know, they're thinking like, oh, well, women can be ordained in this church. And in the LDS church, like every eligible person, like, you get pushed through, like, this really, rigid priesthood progression. And so, they knew that that's not what's happening, but they wanted to tease me about that. So, well, that's been pretty fun. And then, actually had a couple of people from my West Jordan ward that I was really close to, come to my baptism, and that was really neat. I, my parents and my other extended family are concerned about me, and really hesitant. My mom did come for my baptism, which I was really surprised about. It was really difficult for her, but she came and supported me, which was really neat. I was really glad that she did because what I wrote for my, I spoke at my baptism, and gave a little testimony, and I wrote it specifically for members of my family who were having a hard time with this decision, and to assure them that I had thought about it, and I had prayed about it, and I wasn't doing this because I was angry at them or any particular thing, but, like, I was actively choosing to still follow my original baptismal covenant, which was to follow Jesus Christ, and that I feel like I've been honoring my ancestors. It's a really big thing in my family, like, you know, your ancestors sacrificed all of this so that you could have the gospel of Jesus Christ, so you need to be faithful to it. And I know that my extended family feels like I'm, kind of, turning my back on that, but I don't see it that way. I see it as this is what they did. They left what they knew and what they were comfortable with, and they sought after a new way of connecting with God that was

meaningful for them. And that's what it, I think it is a real blessing, and heritage that I have, and that I'm carrying on, even if nobody else understands it.

Brittany Mangelson 1:03:41

I'm just like, vigorously nodding my head, because I had to work through this too, because my pioneer ancestors were also brought up in various conversations and this idea that we are turning our back on what they worked so hard for. I mean that that's a reality that I've had to face and to reconcile. And, you know, for me, I think a lot about informed consent and how did my ancestors, particularly the women, how were they able to fully consent and how much of it was coercion? And how much of it would they have, how would their choices have been different had they had the ability that I have to make choices today, right? And maybe that's giving that, I'm probably practicing, you know, like, presentism there, but it's how I've made sense of it in my head. You know, we can be pioneers too and say, "No, this stops with me." and that, at least that's the way that I've been able to work through it. So, I basically have two more questions for you. I always, well, first, I always like to ask, is there anything else that you want to leave us with? But I am also particularly interested in what your hopes are for Community of Christ. And then also, what you would tell other people, other Latter-day Seekers who are just now learning about Community of Christ? What sort of advice, or what message would you leave for them? So, I guess that's technically three questions. So, anything else? And then hopes for Community of Christ? And then what would you want to tell other Latter-day Seekers?

Michelle Wilde 1:05:32

I think that anything else portion, for me is just how amazing Community of Christ is. I feel a little bit of that, like, new member zeal, like, I want to tell everybody about it. Like, I don't understand why there aren't more people here, I really don't, because I tell people about the Enduring Principles all the time. And maybe I'm getting annoying about it, but I just really, I love the idea of this prophetic people, of the Unity in Diversity. And I think it's really, something really special. Some of, one of the questions that keeps coming up for me, in both my Mormon and post-Mormon friends and family is, like, well, what's like the purpose of life now, now that you don't have this, like, well, it's to be this very specific Mormon purpose of life. And I love the Community of Christ phrase to End Needless Suffering. And so, I hope, what I hope for Community of Christ is that we continue in that and looking at, in our individual lives, and those communities to end all the suffering that, there will always be sickness, there's always going to be death, and difficulty, but where we can end it, we should. And that's what I hope for myself as a member of Community of Christ, that, one of the things I love is being challenged to change the way I think and to be more inclusive, and I think of myself as a pretty open-minded person, but then I come to church, and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I need to do better," and to be a place, as a person, and as a congregation, where people can feel and find that peace and rest. And so, I think that's what I'd say to seekers too. Like, it hurts, oh, my gosh, it hurts so much for so, for a lot of us for so long. And you think you're over it, and then something will come up, or someone will say something or a family event happens, and then it's all there again, and it just hurts, and you need to find time and place to just rest and just recover and not even worry about, like, fixing it or, like, healing. Just, you need to find a place where you can rest, and for me, that's what Community of Christ was. And it may not be for all seekers, but it's a good place to start.

Brittany Mangelson 1:08:44

I love everything you just said. And I think that it's so true that faith transitions are really, really difficult, and that it is an ongoing thing. And I need to remember to give myself grace, because I've gotten frustrated in recent months and years of, like, why can't I just get over this, you know. They're, the behavior that is making me upset, keeps happening, and it's expected, it's their theology. And I still, like, it still hooks me every once in a while. So, I think that it is something that is good to be reminded of, you know, that we gave years and years, if not our entire life, to a different belief system that really did form and shape us and that it let us down in really big ways, and so, it's still gonna hurt. And just because it hurts doesn't mean that you're on the wrong path, right? Like, you can listen to your intuition and go wherever that is, wherever that takes you, whether it's Community of Christ as a stop on the road, or if it's somewhere else, but that, yeah, I do think that we are a good place for a lot of people and I agree with you. I don't really understand why all of our uncomfortable, cold pews aren't filled.

Michelle Wilde 1:10:03

They'd be warm if there were more people.

Brittany Mangelson 1:10:06

That's what we gotta do. I will say, I know that we did get a different thermostat in the sanctuary in Salt Lake and I think that it works a little bit better, but it's still hard because the ceilings are so tall. And I'm like, oh, this is not, this is not great. Oh, Michelle, thank you so much for sharing your story. I learned a lot about you during this interview and found more connections in our shared stories. So, that was a lot of fun. And I know that, you know, there's a lot of Latter-day Seekers that are going to be interested in this as well as lifelong members and everybody in between. So, thank you so much for being here. And yeah, thanks.

Michelle Wilde 1:10:51

Thank you.

Josh Mangelson 1:10:59

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