

## 454 | Fair Trade | Heather Holland

Project Zion Podcast

### 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 the *Project Zion Podcast*. This is Brittany Mangelson and I'm going to be your host for this episode. And today we are bringing you another addition to our "Fair Trade" series, which is where we talk all about faith transitions. So, I'm here with my friend Heather Holland. Heather lives here in Utah, and, well, she should be a member of Community of Christ by now but we had to postpone her confirmation because of the pandemic and omicron. But I'm here with Heather Holland to talk about her faith transition into Community of Christ. So, Heather, why don't you just say hello to our listeners, and just tell us a little bit about yourself?

### Heather Holland 01:15

Okay, so, yeah, I live here. I live in Provo, Utah with my husband, and well, I have five children, but only three of them live with us right now. I was raised in Tooele, Utah. So, you know, grew up here. I'm a Utah girl and I currently teach English and Creative Writing and Gender Studies at Snow College.

### Brittany Mangelson 01:42

Awesome. Those are all very good things. Being a Provo girl myself, and my in-laws live out in Tooele, so there's a lot of camaraderie there. So, as always, we just start at the beginning, whatever the beginning looks like to you. I'm just curious to know what faith and church looked like growing up. Were you engaged in church life? How important was God and spirituality in your formative years as you were growing up?

### Heather Holland 02:14

Yeah, so, church for me as a kid was wonderful and lovely. I grew up in a ward that was, I mean, it wasn't, it was white bread, Mormon, Utah, so it wasn't diverse as far as ethnicity. We had a few, I think, Latino families in our ward boundaries, but lots of different viewpoints and different kinds of people. And, you know, my family went to church every week. And I just remember, church for me was just the feeling of being loved. Like, I had several, like, grandparents there, that just loved me like one of their own. And so, I think the most traumatic thing that happened to me as a kid when I was at church was, one time I was part of a primary program, and I had a part where I was part of the family, and I said something and everybody laughed, and I wasn't trying to be funny. And I think they were probably just doing that, "Oh, cute little kids" sort of laugh where everyone does that. But I was so offended. Like, how dare they laugh at me. I wasn't trying to be funny. But other than that, like, growing up in the church was just lovely for me. And I just, I think of my parents, and how they lived the gospel and the church. And we were not the checklist sort of Mormons. We didn't do family home evening very often. We didn't pray and read scriptures all the time. But the focus was always for us on the Savior and being loving and generous. And my parents are, and always have been, just some of the kindest, most generous people I know. They're just incredible people. And so, you know, that was my view of

Mormonism is just that love and compassion and generosity. And so, that's how I grew up with the church. And that's what felt, I don't know, it just always felt good and right to me. And when I was a little older, I started thinking, well, what's wrong with my family that we're not doing family home evening and we're not checking off all the boxes. But of course, perspective and maturity has helped me understand that, okay, maybe they had it right the whole time. So, yeah, okay, I'll stop babbling. That's.

**Brittany Mangelson 04:56**

No, that's good. So, it sounds like you had a pretty idyllic LDS Mormon experience. So, a lot of the maybe, 'cause, you know, we've talked to various people on the podcast before and there are definitely different types of Mormon experiences and some folks who, you know, grew up in more of, like, a doomsday prepper type family or, you know, people who were super, super, super involved with church and so they had, you know, those, scrupulosity was really intense. And so, it sounds like your family was just, kind of, like a, an average, happy, values-based, love everyone, not super intense, but also dedicated to, you know, the core, I guess the core principles of the gospel, maybe they would say.

**Heather Holland 05:47**

Yeah, definitely. And, you know, I think part of that was my dad wasn't raised LDS. He converted, I think, shortly after my parents got married. And then my mom was raised by her dad, who was active LDS and her mom, who was not. And I know her family were Quakers, but I don't know if her mom was a practicing Quaker or just, kind of, spiritual, but not religious. So, you know, I think from their families, there was never that intense focus that we have to be good Mormons. There was always just, we have to be good people. And being part of the church is part of that.

**Brittany Mangelson 06:29**

Yeah, that's really cool. Like I said, that just, kind of, sounds like the ideal LDS experience. So, that's awesome. So, as you grew up and became a teenager and entered into high school, how did that faith experience continue? I mean, did you ever start questioning your place as a girl, woman in the church? I don't know, just keep talking about your experience, like, in the teen years growing up.

**Heather Holland 07:02**

That's the part of the story that I'm still trying to figure out. Well, it's not the part, but as a teenager, that's, kind of, where the scrupulosity, sort of, started to come in. Again, like, I had a pretty idyllic experience growing up, and I had wonderful Young Women leaders who were, you know, across the board, just good, good people. And a wide variety of, you know, some of them worked outside of the home, some didn't, some had been divorced and remarried. They were all just fairly normal people and so there was never, I didn't have the, so much, the, here's the perfect Molly Mormon, that you have to be like, sort of, experience, other than it's still Young Women's, and it's still the program that teaches you that you have to do X, Y, and Z and that you should definitely prioritize marriage and family and there was a lot of, so many lessons on preparing for the temple and getting married, and, you know, we made temple boxes with little handkerchiefs and things to prepare for the temple. And so, there was that real focus on, you know, you get married, you're a mom, you're in the temple. And then of course, the focus on purity and chastity, which left me feeling pretty unworthy and not good enough as a teenager. And so, I was really good at believing the church was true. I thought it was good. I'd read the *Book of Mormon*, felt, like, yes, it's true, it's good. And if anything's wrong, and anything feels wrong, it's

because I'm unworthy, and there's something wrong with me. And it was really easy to make that the story that anything that didn't feel quite right was because I probably wasn't doing things right. And so, that was sort of my experience as a teenager. I was very, very committed. It was almost like hanging on to a life raft that, if I can hang on to this hard enough, everything's gonna be okay and I'll be good enough. And so, it was comforting, still, in the way it was when I was a child, but also, when I look back, I don't know that I experienced it in the moment, but when I look back, there was a lot of pressure to be a certain way and a lot of messaging that there was only one right way to live a good Mormon life and clearly, I needed to step up my game. So, yeah.

**Brittany Mangelson 10:05**

So, I relate to this 100%. And I really am appreciative of the way that you articulated that, because I think that there's a lot of folks who, and I mean, I should say that I am one of those "lot of folks", or I was one of those "lot of folks" who thought, you know, I could be the Young Women's leader that showed a different way that, you know, like, maybe worked outside the home or did things differently or had different opinions, but from my perspective, when the lessons, like you said, they're so focused on marriage, and disempowering women to feel like they can have a career outside the home, or do anything outside of motherhood, for me, it doesn't, it didn't necessarily matter what my Young Women's leaders were like, and they were awesome, just like yours, right? And truthfully, some of them have even reached out to me post my faith transition, have said, like, "Yes, go Brittany," you know, and they've been super supportive. But it didn't matter that they were teaching me because they were bound to the lessons and the program in the Women's program. And so, yeah, just that reality that it doesn't necessarily matter who is delivering the message, and how much they're trying to leave out or switch things around. You know, it's the actual curriculum, and the culture and the doctrine and the purpose of the church where I started, yeah, brushing up against maybe what I wanted to do, or how I wanted to live my life, but obviously, that was different from what, you know, the church wanted. And so, for me, I just shut myself down, and then lived my life. So, not to talk about myself, but it just sounds like there's a lot of overlap there. And I think that a lot of women can relate because it's really, really hard to graduate from Young Women's without feeling unworthy, and, like, you're selfish if you want to do anything outside of motherhood. So, now that we got that out, so what was your college experience like? Like, I don't, I'm not sure where you got your undergrad from, but, yeah, singles ward, just all of that. And then I guess, just wondering, when you actually started questioning, you know, the purpose and the doctrines of the LDS church.

**Heather Holland 12:41**

Okay, so my college experience was both very long and very short. So, I went to Snow College which, you know, I'm so happy to teach there because it was so good for me, and like a good Mormon girl, I was engaged by the second half of my freshman year at college. And yeah, so, I had a lot of ambitions and dreams and things that I wanted to do. I wanted to potentially be a professional musician. I wanted to do theater, which I did a lot of my first year of college. And somehow in my head, I had never quite connected that, you know, you can't do the "get married early, start having kids right away", and do all these things that you can explore as a young adult with, you know, being a starving artist, that sort of stuff. So, that was there. But also, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. The question was, did I want to teach theater or music or English, and eventually, I settled on English, but sorry, let me back up. So, got engaged to a boy I met at Tooele, Utah at a stake dance. He was an army brat who had lived in

Dugway for a while, and we got married in 1997 when I was 19 years old. After, you know, we'd known each other for about five years, but we dated for about two months before we were engaged and got married about four months after that, so pretty quick. And then I was pregnant within a week of us being married. And our daughter was born less than nine months after we got married because she came a little early. And, yeah, so I still finished my degree at Snow College, got my associate's degree, and then went to a semester at SUU doing English Education, and I was pregnant with my second baby, Scott, and he was born at the end of that summer semester. And then I never went back to school until my 30s. So, I spent my 20s being a stay-at-home mom and a childbirth educator and a doula and reading lots and lots and lots of books. And I would say that whole period was, I mean, we were very active. We were, sort of, at least from the outside, a very ideal LDS family, mom, dad, five kids. On the inside, it was not that pretty. But, you know, I was very invested, and in Primary presidencies and Relief Society presidencies, but the whole time there was sort of this underlying, I'm not sure, that actually started around 1998 when Matthew Shepard was killed. And that was a, I don't know why exactly, but that was hugely influential for me, in starting to think about the LGBT community and friends that I had and adored who were gay. And recognizing, you know, this, living in a world where someone who was so beautiful and wonderful as Matthew Shepard, could be killed like that, is not okay with me, not something I want to be a part of, and then starting to see, okay, I live in a church that very much does not affirm and support the LGBT community. But I, kind of, thought that I could balance those two things. And I did for a long time, like, okay, so, I think maybe they're wrong, that things are gonna get better. And so, my job is just to love people and keep the commandments and do my best. So, it was a really slow burn, I think, my faith transition, that started with that. And then the temple was a difficult thing for me, the inequality and, sort of, sexism that happens in the temple, just starting with when I was pregnant, I hated wearing a veil over my face in the temple. Just that was enough that I'm, like, why do we have to do this? But also, the ways that some of the covenants were really unequal. And so, a lot of seeds of things that, you know, not deal breakers for me, but things that just didn't sit quite right. And again, like I had as a teenager, anything that didn't feel right, I just, sort of, chalked up to, it must be about me not having enough faith, not quite knowing the answers. I've just got to do better, be better, pray more, read my scriptures more. So, I'm gonna pause there.

**Brittany Mangelson 18:06**

Again, I, kind of, feel like you're just sharing my story. Like, there's just so much overlap. And I know you and I have talked about this, just in private, but, yeah, I truly feel like I'm just hearing my story played back to me. So, that would be really tough while you're trying to raise five kids. I mean, you know, we both know what the Primary Program is like. And if you were in the Primary presidency, you know, trying to figure out that balance of, like, okay, I'm recognizing that my church does have room to grow, it does have things that I would like to see them change. My job is to just love people and, you know, follow Jesus, keep the commandments. But to parallel that to raising kids, I mean, that would be difficult. Do, how was it raising your kids in the LDS church? I don't have a lot of experience with that.

**Heather Holland 19:06**

You know, there was a lot that I didn't question. And, because a lot of what, when I started questioning, some of the messaging and things that were happening in Primary didn't start until like my early 30s, when I went back to school and was getting my bachelor's degree, and a lot of the things that I was reading were helping me have a better sense of lived experiences that were very different from mine.

And I hadn't had opportunities to talk to people for whom the church was a really harmful thing in their life. And having been able to stay centered in the church where our family was the, sealed in the temple, nuclear family, everything, I was living that, you know, correct with, you know, air quotes, "correct Mormon life", that I didn't see the margins until about then. And that's when I started getting a better sense of what was happening to those who are marginalized in the church and who couldn't fit themselves into the, you know, pretzel shape needed to fit into that centered experience that I was having. And once I started seeing that more clearly, that's when I started thinking, okay, what if these were my children who were having some of these experiences? And even if they weren't my children, like, how can I feel safe in a space where not everyone feels safe? That if this is harmful for anyone, I can't feel good about being part of it. And that, you know, I still believed it was true. And I held on and I taught my kids and so, things shifted for me from, you know, as I was raising my kids, it was very much, oh, goodness, I was so all in. Like, we would march around our house, singing, "I will go; I will do the things the Lord commands," you know, the primary songs, and we were way into it. But then, as I started looking at it and going, ooh, okay, wait, wait. Maybe this isn't so great. This was by the time, like, my oldest was 12. And so, that really, like, they'd been in it long enough that there wasn't much room to course correct, and be, like, okay, wait a minute. Plus, I also had a spouse who had absolutely zero doubts or questions about the church. And we were on very different tracks as far as how we were considering that and so I didn't have a whole lot of space, I felt, to dissent. And I'm trying to figure out how to say this in the most compassionate but honest way I can, that it, there was a lot of emotional abuse and manipulation and control issues going on in our home with the way that my former husband treated me and my children. And so, I felt, and it wasn't until after I was out of that marriage that I fully saw some of that and how that controlled the ways that I raised my children and the ways that I lived that there didn't feel like there was space for me to be honest and authentic, without that being, punished is too hard a word, but, you know, it was difficult that I did not have a relationship or a spouse where I had that space to explore and still feel accepted and loved. And, you know, to give him credit, he tried, he really did, to try to accept and listen, but I think he had this hope that I was going to figure it out and come back, like, I'd get with the program eventually. And so, even though I was questioning, I think he was holding on, hoping that, at some point, I'd get my act together and get back with things. And I don't know that he recognized or that I felt like I could tell him the full weight of just how harmful I felt the church was. And so, yeah, that's, I mean, I don't know that that's a succinct or great answer. It was complicated. That's the short answer. It was complicated. And I remember, like, my last few years in the church was when I was in Primary presidencies. And I felt, like, I loved the Prime-, the, I loved being in the Primary because it felt like that's where I could be, like, okay, Jesus loves you. And you are good. And you are loved, period. And we didn't have to get into all the complications of, like, is gay marriage right or wrong? Or it was just, I could just very clearly give them the core, you know, love God, love yourself, sort of, two great commandments. And that felt doable in Primary in ways that in Relief Society and Sunday school had started to feel completely impossible. And so, yeah, that's, kind of, what the, that period of my life was.

**Brittany Mangelson 24:50**

Well, and I don't think that there is a succinct or easy way to answer that question. And it's so difficult to go through a faith transition just on your own, but then, when you recognize that that impacts your relationships, and your kids, and your spouse, and trying to juggle that is really, really, really difficult. I mean, I've been there and my kids were only three when we left and it was, still was a disruption to

their life and their social circles and things. And I did have the support of my spouse, and so, to not have that and to have older kids. I know a lot of our listeners can relate who would consider themselves Latter-day Seekers, because it doesn't always happen in a very clean, easy, everybody's on board, and you all just leave together and you know, you share the same doubts. And that is very, very, very rarely, if it ever happens at all, right? So, yeah, thank you for walking us through that, and just sharing the complexities and that, you know, in a lot of patriarchal communities, which the LDS church is proudly one, women don't always have the full autonomy to make their own decisions or to lead their family because your ex-husband was your priesthood authority and the head of your family. And so, that really diminishes the power that you have as a mother to make decisions for your own family. And that's a dynamic that is less talked about, I would say, or, you know, because it's just, kind of, a given such a cultural and doctrinal, like you said, with the temple thing that gets pulled in, but then it impacts everyday life and every decision. And so often women just, are just taught and expected to keep quiet and to let their spouse ultimately make the decisions and to be the, you know, director of the family and the course that they're on. So, again, I think that your story is relatable to a lot of people and just really shows the complexities of the family dynamics in a faith transition, which is really, really difficult. Also, I had completely forgotten about that song, so.

**Heather Holland 27:21**

Right? Yup.

**Brittany Mangelson 27:23**

And, yeah.

**Heather Holland 27:24**

"Nephi's Courage."

**Brittany Mangelson 27:25**

Yes, "Nephi's Courage. The Lord commanded Nephi." I don't [inaudible] forgot about that song. Oh, my goodness, that's hilarious. Yeah, that's great.

**Heather Holland 27:39**

Yeah, well, and one thing, like, I'm just thinking about the dynamic with me, my ex-husband and I, and we've had chances to talk post-divorce, and all of the stuff, but a lot of what was going on with him, like, he doesn't see it this way, because he's still very active LDS, and for him, you know, when we were going through our divorce that was the thing he clung to, that kept him afloat, when everything was going down, and things were hard. But a lot of the reasons that I see him being as manipulative, and controlling, and hurtful with our children as he was, is because he had this constant sense of not being good enough, that he wasn't a good enough priesthood leader, that he was doing things wrong in his own life, that if his children didn't turn out okay, that that was a reflection on him, and that he wasn't a good enough church member. And so, I just see a lot of the ways that he was not as great a dad or husband as he could have been, actually stemmed from, kind of, the pressure to be a good Mormon. And again, I think he would see it differently, but that is a lot of what I saw, was that he had this really deep sense of self-loathing and unworthiness that came from there only being one right way to live, and

he knew he wasn't doing it, and if our children weren't doing it, then that meant he wasn't good enough. And so, yeah, it's tricky. It's all very tricky being a family and having different ways of looking at things.

**Brittany Mangelson 29:24**

Well, and I think the same thing about different family members that I have, or friend's parents, etc., that if they're, you know, if my generation isn't living up to the standards, or if we leave, etc., etc., our parents blame themselves and so, I can definitely see that that culture of feeling like you're responsible for this flock and if you aren't living up to the standards, and if you aren't doing enough, then, you know, you blew it as a parent. So, I can sympathize with that as well. And you know that, that's, that, at different times within Mormonism is explicitly talked about, you know, and the pressure to have a faithful family is really strong. And I'm assuming that that pressure is even talked about more strongly in priesthood, different priesthood classes and quorums and things, because, yeah, men are supposed to be the leaders of their family, and so, if there's any sort of fracture, any sort of wandering off the straight and narrow, then who's to blame? You know, them. So, that's, yeah, that is a tricky dynamic. Yeah, definitely.

**Heather Holland 30:43**

Sorry. It's honestly part of what kept me in the church as long as it did when my faith started crumbling. I mean, there was this pressure of, like, ooo, what if I lead my children astray? Like, if I happen to be wrong, and I take my whole family with me, and then I change my mind, there's, you know, no one doing that on my own. But there was also a real sense of pressure because I have wonderful loving parents, and the most painful thing for me of a faith transition has been knowing that I might disappoint them, because they are good. And I've often said that everyone, if everyone lived Mormonism the way that my parents live Mormonism, like, everybody should be Mormon, just, maybe not entirely. They're not perfect, but it's led them to be generous and kind and ethical, good people, without a lot of judgmental elements of it, without that sense of having to be perfect. And so, you know, if I'd had family, honestly, that I knew, if I left the church, they would just flat out reject me, I'd be, like, screw it. Here I go. But knowing that I had family that I would disappoint and hurt, that they would still be there and still love me, was actually harder for me, knowing that I might make my parents feel like they'd failed. Whereas I, kind of, see it, that I'm acting on the values that they gave me, and continuing to try to be generous and good, and, you know, follow Jesus's example the way they taught me to, it's just taken me in a different direction. So, yeah, that pressure to be good parents, and that if your parents, if your children don't turn out all right, then that's so painful, so, so painful. And with my parents, there's the added, like, my brother died of a heroin overdose a few years ago. And so, there's that added pain of, okay, is our family going to be whole? And, I imagine that it's just probably painful for them to see me leaving, of my own free will, and not because of addictions or other things, so.

**Brittany Mangelson 33:03**

Yeah. Oh, thank you for sharing that. And again, I can relate, because the disappointment of, disappointing really good people that taught you good values, like, that is very, very tricky. And it's an ongoing disappointment that, you know, shows up in different ways, at different times, and then feeling, like, and again, I'm speaking from my experience, but feeling like you have to prove yourself, like, I still am a good person, you know? I'm not this moral-less, you know, like, I didn't throw everything away.

Like, I'm still a good person, but for me, like, feeling like I have to prove that in some way, which is silly, but it's it happens. It's reality.

**Heather Holland 33:49**

Yeah, it's there.

**Brittany Mangelson 33:50**

Yeah. So, what was your breaking point with the church, and what did that look like?

**Heather Holland 34:01**

Gosh, there were a series of breaking points, and so, 2013, my ex-husband and I separated and then I was dealing with intense depression and anxiety, and a lot of it for me, okay, let me see. I'm just trying to trace this. So, there's one night where I had a wonderful friend that I was going to school with, and we would go to creative writing club together and then I'd give him a ride home because he was on my way. And one night he, before he went into his apartment said, "Heather, I need to tell you something. You know how I told you I was sick last week, and that's why I wasn't coming to school or anything?" He said, "I was actually in my room, playing video games, trying not to kill myself, because I've realized I'm," he said, "because I'm gay. And I've realized I can't be gay, and be Mormon, and still be okay." And I remember telling him, at that point that, you know, God loves you and wants you to be happy. And feeling that so strongly that if you need to leave the church to be happy and whole, and well, then that's where you need to be, because God wants you happy and whole more than he wants you to be part of any one particular church. And that was the moment where I, kind of, made a commitment to myself that I was going to be true to what felt right at my core, instead of what any external religion was telling me was right. And so that, sort of, started it. And then there was, you know, the ordain women movement was a moment where, I didn't jump in, because I was, again, very afraid of judgment, of disappointing people, but I was 100% on board with, like, things are not okay, and the inequity between genders in our church. And so that, sort of, started to snowball. I remember, on the "wear pants to church today" was, which was so, like, I try to explain that to people outside of the church. They're, like, why was this a big deal? I'm, like, oh, people were up in arms. There were news stories about it, and, oh, it was a big deal. And I, you know, wasn't sure I wanted to out myself as, you know, a rabid feminist who wears pants to church. And so, I laid on my floor crying that morning, trying to decide what to wear, whether to wear pants or a skirt. And it was, you know, I look back, and I shouldn't see it as silly, 'cause that's not very compassionate to my past self. But that was a big deal. And knowing that people were that angry about women wearing pants to church, let alone wanting to be ordained to the priesthood, or wanting to have more say, and power in the church was just, you know, too much. And so, you know, in, back to 2013, moving into 2014, I remember, just praying my heart out, and not being able to feel the Spirit, not being able to feel that warmth that I always felt when I prayed. And I look back and realize, oh, that was probably just depression. Like, I couldn't feel a lot of good things. But the story I was telling myself is God isn't there. God isn't real. If I can't have that connection, then I think maybe I just had convinced myself, there was a God. And, at that point, I was angry and sad and borderline atheist, and really struggling. And that's when my younger brother died suddenly, and going through grief and loss without that belief in an afterlife, without any sense that I don't even think God exists, let alone knowing if an afterlife exists. And also, the guilt of, I was so concerned about my brother's eternal well-being, whether or not he was going to be with us forever, that I put so much pressure on him to



come back to the church, to stop using, and it kept me from just being there with him. And that, I think, was the biggest breaking point where I'm, like, I feel like the way, it's not that I blame the church, but the way that I followed the teachings of the church kept me from loving my brother in the way that he needed. And, I don't ever want to be in that place where I'm letting worry about an afterlife or eternity get in the way of doing what I need to do to love people right here and right now. And if I'm not living heaven and loving the people I love here on Earth, then what's the point of afterlife? It needs to be about now. And so, that was probably the point where there was no return. I still kept attending church for a couple of years, but I think that was probably the main breaking point for me.

**Brittany Mangelson** 39:57

Ah, thank you for sharing that, Heather. I just can feel the weight in your words and again, know that so many people can relate because recognizing that the focus on the afterlife and the focus on progression and perfection, really, really puts a barrier up to real human suffering here and now. And it goes against your core nature to love, right? And if that's the Mormonism that your parents raised you in, and if those are the values that your parents and your family had, I, it, kind of, goes back to that, the first thing, one of the first things we were talking about where, you know, it doesn't necessarily matter how great of a Young Women's leader you have, you know, the core teachings teach X, Y, and Z. And so, it doesn't matter. I mean, it does matter, but it doesn't matter completely, what kind of home you grew up in, because the core teachings of the church still just, kind of, cast this shadow of focusing so much on the afterlife and being perfect. And that becomes the barrier, right? Like, the doctrine, the teachings become a barrier to love, and not to get too much into the weeds, but, you know, even the current prophet says, like, God's love is not unconditional, like, it's conditional. And that has very real impact to how humans interact with one another. If that's your construct of God, if that's your construct of the purpose of life, when things go the quote, unquote, "wrong way", it impacts our ability to show up and love and cope and grieve, and all of the things. So, I'm really sorry, that that lesson came to you in such a tragic way, but thank you for sharing. Thank you for sharing.

**Heather Holland** 42:05

Yeah, it's, it was definitely hard. And, you know, it continues to be hard, that, you know, what, if, and how could I have been a better sister, etc.? But, yeah, I, just listening to you, I keep thinking of the, people always say, "The church is perfect, but the people aren't." And I, kind of, feel the opposite way.

**Brittany Mangelson** 42:29

Me too.

**Heather Holland** 42:30

LDS people are good. I love them. They're wonderful, and they're trying their best, but some of the things, not all of the things, but some of the things in the LDS church suck, and make it harder for us to see each other and be compassionate and gentle and let go of the shame and trust that things are going to be okay. And if this whole Christ story of grace and goodness is true, then we don't need to worry so much about making sure that everybody's toeing the line or that we're doing everything perfectly, like, I just have so much, not certainty at all, like, who knows, but just trust that things are okay. And we're going to be okay, as long as we hold on to each other, and do our best by each other.

**Brittany Mangelson 43:32**

Absolutely. Amen to that. You just preached a sermon, my friend. It's so true, though. And I know for me leaving, the line that you just said, it makes, some things in the LDS church make it so hard to see each other. That was 100% my experience and then when I stepped away from it, I was, like, oh, this world is not as scary. This world is not as, you know, filled with evils, and, like, just all of the things. Like, I could actually see people with compassion first and recognize that I was worthy of receiving that compassion. And it wasn't, like, Brittany Mangelson against the world, you know. It was like, oh, I am the world and God loves the world and, like, we're okay. We're okay if we just meet each other with compassion and empathy, and, yeah. Again, relate to everything that you're saying. And I absolutely agree that line of, "The church is perfect, but the people are not." I'm, like, uh, you're getting it backwards. It's not. Oh, goodness. So, let's move into, I guess, your reconstruction phase. So, talk about when you first encountered Community of Christ. Were you looking for a church? Were you wanting to replace it? Your Mormon experience, just, yeah, talk about those early days of finding Community of Christ.

**Heather Holland 45:06**

Yeah, I was definitely, kind of, flailing at that point, because, you know, when you grow up and, I think I was 34-35, mid 30s at this point, and I had had very few years where I didn't go to church every single Sunday. Like, the idea of not having a church family, not having that was really hard. And yet, at this point, I was just fully atheist, like, no, I can't, I don't think there's a God. If there is a God, God is a jerk, who's mean and makes everything harder and set this up for all of us to fail. And, you know, very much in that anger phase, if we think of, like, Fowler stages of faith, like, I was so angry, so angry, and so hurt. And that was also around the time that there was the exclusion policy in the LDS church, where children were excluded from saving ordinances if their parents were gay, and together, and I was like, okay, I know, this is not of God. Like, I cannot say that the Jesus that said, you know, "Let the children come unto me," would say, oh, except if your parents are gay. Like, that was just so not okay with me. And that was also around the time when Kate Kelly was excommunicated. And you know, I don't know, Kate, at all, personally, but I believed strongly in all of the principles she was fighting for. I was just quieter about it. And so, that felt very much like a symbolic excommunication of everyone who held any dissenting beliefs, who wanted to speak up about them, who felt uncomfortable with the church, in the way that gender and sexuality were being handled. And so, I, you know, I was just done. And I posted something on Facebook, I think, and my friend Monica English, who you know, reached out to me and said, "Heather, are you, how are you doing with faith and things?" just very, you know, putting feelers out, and I let her know where I was. She said, "We should go have lunch sometime, 'cause I would love to talk to you about this." Because you know, that "me too", because you never want to, at least I've never wanted to be super outward and critical in ways that would make other people feel judged for staying in the LDS church. And I've, you know, having been through a faith crisis, it sucks. I don't want to initiate that for anyone. And so, a lot of us, I think, go through it alone, especially then. I think there's more talk about it now, but you, there are people right next to you going through the same thing, and you don't know it. So, anyway, Monica reached out to me. We went to lunch, and we were talking and, and she just told me the story about finding Community of Christ, not at all in a missionary way, like, I want to make that really clear. She was just saying, "So I was going to the LDS church and Community of Christ at the same time, and then meeting times changed, and I just decided to keep going to Community of Christ because that felt right." And I'm, like, that's, that weird, RLDS church. Like, I know

better than to think they're okay. I mean, it wasn't quite that judgmental, but there was that prejudice there where I'm, like, I've been taught that those are the weirdos with a weird looking temple. So...

**Brittany Mangelson 48:47**

Know what you mean.

**Heather Holland 48:49**

Yeah. So, it was Father's Day, I think in 2015, that I first attended. I was going to Tooele to see my dad, my kids were with their dad, and so, like, I was free. I could, I didn't need to go to my ward. And I did not want to go to an LDS church on Father's Day. So, I thought I'll go to Community of Christ. And my first impressions that first time were, like, this is weird and different. I'm not used to this sort of service, but all these people are really nice, and it, and so, I just started coming more and more and it felt like it, whether or not, I didn't feel a need to jump into another religion. I didn't feel a need to join anything else because I wasn't even sure if I felt like God existed or if religion was even going to be a good thing for me, but I did know that I felt safe in Community of Christ, that I could say out loud, "I'm not sure if God exists." And nobody even batted an eye or looked at me like I'd grown two heads, which is what I feel like would happen if I were to say that in Sunday school in the LDS church. So, yeah, it just felt like a good place to rest and be and still be able to have a sense of spirituality and community without all of the baggage I was carrying around from the LDS church.

**Brittany Mangelson 50:21**

So, I also, when my husband was first looking into Community of Christ, I thought, what? The RLDS church? Like, what are they even doing these days, right? Like, I just, I thought I knew, but I had no idea. But I had to, kind of, get over some of those hang ups. And it sounds like, you know, you walked in with some preconceived ideas that were, like, wait, what is this church? you know. So, can you maybe talk us through some of those hang ups, or how you were able to move beyond the, wait, that weird church? Those kinds of things?

**Heather Holland 51:01**

Yeah, I mean, part of it was that the services looked really different, and so, that took some getting used to, that the prayer for peace, and lighting candles, and ringing chimes, and that was all really foreign to me. And having been raised in the "one true church" mentality, anything that feels foreign, I think, at first feels wrong, and having to step back and go, okay, this is different and uncomfortable, because it's new, but that doesn't mean it's bad, and having to get out of that "one true church." And, also, like, having that still in the back of my head, even though I had really just totally deconstructed all of my beliefs and sense of what I thought was true, I still had that, well, this doesn't feel like the "one true" church either. And having to let go of, like, there, I don't believe there is such a thing anymore. There are churches and there are ways that we can find community and feel a connection to the Divine, and they are many. And I think it's lovely and beautiful that there are so many spaces, but it took a while to get there. And part of it was also, like, there was this affinity for Community of Christ, because it came from the same background of Joseph Smith and the Restoration, while also a lot of push back, because it came from Joseph Smith and the Restoration. And so, having to make my peace with Joseph Smith was definitely part of it. I didn't even have, like, I didn't even start looking into church history and didn't read the *CES Letter*, hadn't looked into *Book of Mormon* historicity until well after I

had left the church. I know for a lot of people, that's what sends them out, but for me, it was just an inner sense of, the church I'm in does not align with my values. I can't continue to be here and have a sense of integrity. But then I started wrestling with all that other stuff, and that was when I'm, like, okay, well, if none of this is as good, or as, you know, golden and whitewashed as I was taught, then, none of its true, can't possibly be true. And so, I had to wrestle with that because Community of Christ has the same background. Then there was also this, like, I had this internal principle of belief that we should accept and love all forms of people, but I was very much used to going to church and having a certain kind of people and a certain kind of veneer, that everybody at least tried to look the same and be the same and act the same. And so, coming to Community of Christ, I'm like, there's all kinds of different people here. And I had to get over my own, like, I hate admitting this, but I felt like, at that point in my life, I loved people on principle, but still had that emotional discomfort of, but wait a minute. And then it took a while, where, as I started looking at this, I'm, like, wait a minute, this is exactly what I want. I want to be in community with people who don't have it together and don't pretend to have it together and are coming from all kinds of different spaces, and that everyone's welcome and everyone's loved. And so, that was a lot of, you know, just, kind of, working through the ways that I'd been programmed to see the world as, you know, the one true or the right way, versus everybody else and being able to step into that wider view of, okay, this is what it looks like. This is the, kind of, Zion, or I don't know that Zion's the right word, but this is the sort of community I want to be a part of, because I feel, like, you know, sort of a ragamuffin. Like, I'm, even if I look okay on the outside, I feel pretty dang messy on the inside. So, being able to walk in and be like, okay, yeah, these are my people. And so, I don't know, it was just, sort of, a slow process of recognizing the, that I wasn't looking for another true church. I was looking for another community that could help me feel a sense of my own worth and the worth of others and a sense of connection to something larger than myself. And so, recognizing the ways that Community of Christ had sought what I was seeking, and that I could see that in their growth, in their journey toward moving from that early Joseph Smith days to a church that ordains women and fully affirms the LGBT community. That all of that was messy and hard, in the same way my journey had been messy and hard. And that is where I grew to just love it and feel safe and good Community of Christ.

### **Brittany Mangelson 56:23**

Once again, I feel like I'm just hearing myself talk, because I could have said all of those things. And I distinctly remember, you know, I had been with Community of Christ for maybe, I don't know, three or four months at that point, and we were inching closer to the decision to actually join, and I looked around and just thought, like, man, if we were all, if the people in the sanctuary were all in a Mormon ward together, with just other typical Utah Mormon people, we probably, very few of us would probably be friends with each other, right? Like, if we were all in the same neighborhood, and we were all, we still had that Mormon lens on, we probably would not be confiding in each other like we are in this sanctuary. We would not be hearing each other's stories like we were doing, and I would have held prejudice. And that is something that, you know, I really had to wrestle with, of, like, oh, wow. Like, I am part of the problem of people feeling isolated in a religious community, like, I was part of that system. And I have often joked, but it's not really a joke, but I was a really, really good Mormon, which meant I was a pretty judgmental person. And, you know, I definitely, very distinctly remember looking around the sanctuary in Salt Lake and our congregation is primarily former LDS, and just thinking, man, what a, what a place that we, as a very, very broken community, who all feel rejected to some degree, can

come together in community and can be friends with one another. Because, again, if the circumstances were different, if we just all happen to be in the same ward, LDS congregation, there are very real things that would have kept us separated. And what a tragedy that is, 'cause I really like the Salt Lake congregation. We are a quirky bunch, and I am a fan of us. Like, it's good, it's good.

**Heather Holland 58:36**

Me too, and I've been so enriched by just the diversity of all the different kinds of voices, and people, and lives that we come in contact with, like, such good people that you would never know that, just looking from the outside and judging from that Mormon lens that you're not doing the, you know, perfect veneer on the outside, which, you know, if you dig far enough, there are very, very few people for whom that's not just a veneer.

**Brittany Mangelson 59:09**

Yeah.

**Heather Holland 59:10**

And we love that our Salt Lake congregation, we can just let that down. We're, like, look at how messy I am. And everyone's like, yeah, me too. It's wonderful.

**Brittany Mangelson 59:24**

Exactly. We are a quirky, but very lovable bunch. Makes me laugh. So, as I mentioned at the beginning, you were supposed to be confirmed by now and our congregation closed on the day of your confirmation so, we postponed that a little bit until we can be back together in person, which I, you know, feel bad about, but I'm really glad that it's still gonna be able to happen in person. But what are the kinds of things that you've been able to do as being part of this community? I mean, how have you been able to get involved? That kind of thing.

**Heather Holland 1:00:10**

So, I've done less than I would like to do, and not because I haven't been welcomed to, but because even up until, like, six months ago, maybe a little earlier than that, I was still in the Mormon mindset of, like, you don't overstep your boundaries. That's not my calling. That's not what I do. I don't have the authority to do that. And so, I was just, I've just, kind of, been waiting to be asked, because I didn't want to overstep, which, now that I look at, I'm, like, oh, I could have just been fully involved planning services, doing whatever, from day one that I stepped in. But one thing I've loved doing is being part of the music back when Seth Bryant was our pastor. I just, maybe, no, it was even when Robin, it was when Robin was still here. I told her, "Hey, I'd really love to play the piano. Can I do that?" And she said, "Yeah, of course," and gave me hymn books. And so, I got to play the piano, which I love, which was my comfort zone in the LDS church too. I, kind of, pushed against it because, like, guys, I have talents other than playing the piano and directing music. And that's, sort of, what happens if you're a music person in the LDS church, you get pigeonholed. And so, that was frustrating for me. But also, it's really nice to be, like, I could just show up and play the piano, and a lot of people can't play the piano. So, it's a really nice form of ministry, to be able to offer that. So, I've been able to do that and give prayers for peace and share my experiences. And just, I'm just trying to think, it's, knowing that I could

have been helping with planning services and all of those sorts of things all along, like, I'd like to do that more. But yeah, I don't know that I have anything more articulate to say on that.

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:02:08

Well, I think that the fact that you've been able to contribute to conversations that foster and allow for doubt, and for deconstruction and reconstruction, I think that that, in and of itself, means that you, I'm about to get cheesy, but, like, that means that you're a minister of hospitality and invitation, and allowing for people to hear their story within your story, that's huge. And that's not something that you can do in the LDS church, right? Like, it, that goes back to that whole veneer thing, you can't necessarily be authentic. And so, showing up as your, just, Heather Holland-self, and being able to contribute to Sunday school, or even, you know, just talking with people over potlucks back when we used to be able to have potlucks, just those kinds of things, that's huge. But I'm also glad that you raised the point that this transition for LDS folks can be really difficult because being told what to do is what we're used to. And so, when that is, kind of, turned back on us and, like, well, you tell us what you want to do, it, it's weird, because you've never been taught to even think about what you want to do, right? You're told what to do at every step of the way. And so, to have that autonomy turned back on you, for me, it was a little bit jarring. And I just, kind of, said, "Yes," to everything to figure out, you know, like, what, like, somebody needed, you know, they needed help here. And I'm, like, okay, I'll do that, mostly because I just didn't even know my own personality. I didn't even know how to plug in and I was drowning with three young children. So, I'm like, oh, something that will help me, you know, interact with adults, great. But, yeah, it can be really tricky to even, to know how to even begin to figure out what you want to do, to be able to say, "I'm going to use my voice to vocalize that." And then you have this whole idea of, like, man, I've been burned out because I've been a worker bee in my ward for so long. You know, like, it's kind of nice to just sit in the pew and have a break. And so, it's a really, it doesn't seem like it would be a complex thing for Latter-day Seekers, but it actually is. And time and time again, I feel, like, just, like, those complexities of this part of the transition are just made so apparent. It's, like, oh, yeah, we really do struggle with volunteerism in a way that is unsurprising because we're not, we did not grow up with a foundation of even believing that we could do anything that we wanted to do. So, I don't know, it's weird. It's very weird. So.

**Heather Holland** 1:05:03

Well, and just the authority structure is so different.

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:05:06

Yeah.

**Heather Holland** 1:05:06

It's the idea of, like, I could just tell Carla, "Hey, I'd like to plan a worship service," and she'd say, "Okay, here's the information you need. Let me know if you need help," and I could just run with it. That is not something I would, like, that's not something that the normal member just does in the LDS church. That's something that leaders do. It comes from the top down. It's very much prescribed. And so, it took me a while to recognize that, oh, there's not the same sense of hierarchical authority here. Like, even, like, the first time I met Steve Veazey, like, he introduced himself to me as Steve, and it took me a minute to go, like, oh, wait, that's the dude that's the prophet and president of the church?

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:05:54

That's Steve...

**Heather Holland** 1:05:54

He sat over there, he's in a polo shirt with a backpack. And that was so refreshing, that for him, that office of prophet and president is about leadership, and responsibility, and stewardship, and love, not about power and authority and status. And so, and that that's the way the whole church, kind of, functions, that there's not that sense of status, and some people are allowed to have access to this information, and some people are allowed to do this, but everybody else, just do your calling and be quiet. And that may be a little too harsh, but maybe not. It's just very different getting used to, very different.

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:06:45

Yeah, absolutely. And I don't think that was too harsh, for what it's worth. So, Heather, I, I've just really enjoyed this conversation a lot. I'm curious to know, what you're excited about in Community of Christ? Or what are some of your hopes for the church? And also, what would you tell other Latter-day Seekers that are looking into Community of Christ? So, that was, those were, that was, kind of, big, but, like, what are your hopes for the community? And then, what would you just want to share with other Latter-day Seekers?

**Heather Holland** 1:07:22

I think, I mean, first of all, I'm excited to actually get confirmed soon here. But I just, I mean, I just hope we keep growing and keep having difficult conversations and being willing to open space for those who are hurting and doubting, and I hope I can continue to be part of that, just that continual growth and confronting difficult truths, rather than backing away from them, because I think God is every bit as much in that struggle, in that mess, as in, you know, the peace and the pretty things that come with religion and religious community. And so, I just hope we keep doing that. And I'm excited to be a bigger part of that. And if I were to tell other seekers, one thing I would say is, don't be afraid of being proselytized. In fact, if you want to join, you're going to have to tell them over and over again, and pin them down and say, "No, really, I want to be part of this church." So, don't worry that if you walk in it's going to be a missionary experience for the people there. Just come and rest and see if you feel good there. And people will just love you and be glad you're there. And you don't have to be any particular way. And you can be honest about what you believe and don't believe, and where you are, and there will be space opened up for you. And, you know, I haven't attended every congregation all over the world, but I know that's true of the Salt Lake congregation. And I was in Fort Collins, and it was definitely true there. But I think that's the main thing. Like, don't worry that this is going to be, you're going to feel any pressure at all to join, just people are going to be happy to have you there. And if you ever do want to join, you are going to have to make that very clear before it happens.

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:09:33

Oh, I'm laughing, but man, it's, kind of, a blessing or a curse. And I feel, like, particularly in the Salt Lake congregation, we're so sensitive to putting that pressure on people. So, yeah, you are not the only one that's been hanging around for years and people, you know, like, is anyone ever gonna ask me to

be baptized? It's like, well, no, that's initiated by you. And again, that's one of those things that just, kind of, gets lost in translation sometimes that's unexpected. So.

**Heather Holland 1:10:03**

And I legitimately waited on my own, for a long time, for reasons. So, it wasn't like I've been begging to get baptized for years. But yeah, it is, kind of, a, like, no really, really. It's time.

**Brittany Mangelson 1:10:17**

So, Heather, as you were exploring Community of Christ and realizing that you wanted to join, what was the reaction, like, to your family and friends? I know that you've since remarried. I actually had the privilege of marrying you, which was awesome. But how did those conversations go with your loved ones?

**Heather Holland 1:10:41**

So, yeah, with Rob, my husband now, he's been part of the conversation from day one. He was there for the awful, awful reconstruction. I mean, deconstruction, because we were friends while I was going through divorce and everything, and he has been there every step of the way, and he's also former LDS. His parents are wonderful, wonderful people, former BYU professors, they're currently serving a mission in the Congo, and they've been super supportive and loving about it. But Rob is an atheist and a Buddhist and very much driven by values and an ethical center, but not religious. And yet, he has been supportive every single step of the way, and just celebrated me being willing to grow and change and explore and figure things out. And so, you know, when I told him that I'd decided for sure, he was not surprised. He's, like, I've been waiting for you to figure that out. So, he was not at all surprised and just completely supportive. And my children have been so supportive, and they're all over the map. I have a child, who's still very active LDS, and she's been so kind and supportive of my faith and my faith journey. And I hope I've been supportive of hers, 'cause she's so good, and the LDS church serves her and helps her be better. So, she's been good. And then my other kids have differing levels of faith and belief and relationships with all of that, and they've been wonderful. And, yeah, it's been good. And I've been pretty, like, I'm not advertising the fact that I'm changing religions, 'cause I just, kind of, do keep things close to the chest. And so, I have some friends who have been loving and wonderful and supportive, some who have no idea. And so, we'll see, as I'm more and more open, how people respond. But yeah, that's that.

**Brittany Mangelson 1:12:58**

It's a lot of relationships to navigate, but it sounds like the people who are closest in your everyday life are really supportive, and that is what matters most. So, thank you for sharing.

**Heather Holland 1:13:12**

Yeah.

**Brittany Mangelson 1:13:13**

So, Heather, thank you for sharing your story and for being so vulnerable and being so open. I always like to ask if there's anything that I didn't ask or things that you wanted to say, just as we wrap up.



**Heather Holland** 1:13:29

I think the biggest thing I've learned from my faith journey that, if I could go back and tell myself seven, eight years ago, would be that there's not a right way to be, or a correct timeline for figuring things out, or a correct destination, even, and, I think, suffered a lot of self-doubt and self-flagellation because I felt, like, oh, I should be over this by now, or I need to just either decide to go back to believing in God and religion or just give it up and live a secular life and be a good person. But I think the thing that I'd tell myself is just give yourself space to grow into who you're going to be, and that there's no rush. There's no right way to do this. But just be kind and recognize it might take a while and that's okay. And just figure out where you need to be and wherever you are on the road is the right place to be right now.

**Brittany Mangelson** 1:14:48

Absolutely, what beautiful advice and needed advice, to just take your own life, by, to just take control of your own life. That's, that again, is something that we don't often give ourselves the permission and the grace to do. So, thank you for articulating that. Okay, well, Heather, thank you so much again for sharing this story. I know that I related to so many points in it, and I know that other seekers are going to relate to it as well. And again, just thank you for your vulnerability and for sharing a big, big piece of who you are and of your heart. So, thank you so much.

**Heather Holland** 1:15:27

Thank you.

**Josh Mangelson** 1:15:27

Thank you. Thanks for listening to Project Zion Podcast, subscribe to our podcast on Apple podcast, Stitcher, or whatever podcast streaming service you use. And while you're there, give us a five star rating. Project Zion Podcast is sponsored by Latter-day Seeker Ministries of Community of Christ. The views and opinions expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Latter-day Seeker Ministries, or Community of Christ. The music has been graciously provided by Dave Heinze